





# THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE.

EDITED BY THE REV.

W. ROBERTSON NICOLL, M.A., LL.D.,

*Editor of "The Expositor."*

## THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.

BY

SAMUEL COX, D.D.

London:

HODDER AND STOUGHTON,

27, PATERNOSTER ROW,

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MDCCCXC.

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THE BOOK  
OF  
ECCLESIASTES.

*WITH A NEW TRANSLATION.*

BY  
SAMUEL COX, D.D.,

AUTHOR OF COMMENTARIES ON JOB, RUTH, ETC.

*"Omnia vanitas, præter amare Deum, et illi soli servire."*

—ST. AUGUSTINE.

London :  
HODDER AND STOUGHTON,  
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## P R E F A C E .

THE Lectures on which this book is founded were delivered five-and-twenty years ago, and were published in A.D. 1867.<sup>1</sup> For more than twenty years the book has been out of print, a large first edition having been speedily sold out. No other edition was issued owing to the fact that my publisher soon passed into another profession. I have often been asked to reprint it, but have always felt that, before reprinting, I must rewrite it. Till of late, however, I could not command leisure for the task. But when, at the commencement of this year, the Editor of THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE did me the honour to ask permission to reprint it, that he might include it in this excellent series, I had leisure at command, and cheerfully devoted it to the revision of my work. Among the more recent commentaries I have read with this purpose in view, those which

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<sup>1</sup> *The Quest of the Chief Good.* A Popular Commentary on the book ECCLESIASTES, with a New Translation. By Samuel Cox. London : Arthur Miall.

I have found most helpful and suggestive were that of Delitzsch, that by Dr. Wright, that of Dean Plumptre, and the fine fragment contributed to *THE EXPOSITOR* by Dr. Perowne, the Dean of Peterborough. In the preface to the former edition I dwelt on my indebtedness to the commentary of Dr. Ginsburg, published in A.D. 1861. In my judgment it still remains by far the best, the most thorough and the most sound. It has but one serious defect; it is addressed to scholars, and so abounds in learning and erudition that it can never come into popular use. Indeed even now, although during the last twenty years there has been an immense advance in the study and exposition of Holy Writ, and many able and learned men have devoted themselves to the service of the general public, I know of no commentary on this Scripture which really meets the wants of the unlettered. I cannot but hope, therefore, that *the Quest of the Chief Good* may still serve a useful purpose, and that, in its revised form, it may be found helpful to those who most need help.

In rewriting the book I have retained as much as I could of its earlier form, lest the vivacity of a first exposition of the Scripture should be lost. And, indeed, the alterations I have had to make are but

slight for the most part, though I have in many places altered, and, I hope, amended both the translation and the commentary: but there are one or two additions—they will be found on pages 20—26, and, again, in certain modifications of the exposition of Chapter XII., verses 9—12, on pages 279—305, dealing mainly with the structure of *Ecclesiastes*—which may, I trust, be found useful not to the general reader alone. Since the original edition appeared I have had to study the Book of Job, most of the Psalms, many of the Prophetic writings, and some of the Proverbs; and it was inevitable that in the course of these pleasant studies I should arrive at clearer and more definite conceptions on the structure of Hebrew poetry. These I now place at the service of my readers, and submit to the judgment of scholars and critics.

Another and much more important result of these subsequent studies has been that I can now speak with a more assured confidence of the theme of this Scripture, and of its handling by the Author. None of the scholars who have recently commented on the Book doubt that it *is* the quest of the chief good which it sets forth; and though some of them arrange and divide it differently, yet, on the whole and in the main, they are agreed that this quest is

urged in Wisdom, in Pleasure, in Devotion to Public Affairs, in Wealth and in the Golden Mean ; and that it ends and rests in the large noble conclusion, that only as men reverence God, and keep his commandments, and trust in his love, do they touch their true ideal, and find a good that will satisfy and sustain them under all changes, even to the last. The assent to this view of the Book was by no means general a quarter of a century ago ; but it is so wide now, and is sanctioned by the authority of so many schools of learning, that I think no reader of the following pages need be disturbed by misgivings as to the accuracy of the main lines of thought here set forth.

Few Scriptures of the Old Testament are so familiar to the general reader as *Ecclesiastes* ; and that mainly, I think, because it addresses itself to a problem which is “yours, mine, every man’s.” Many more quotations from it have entered into our current speech than have been taken from *Job*, for example, although *Job* is both a much larger and a much finer poem than this—“the finest poem,” as a great living poet has said, “whether of the modern or of the antique world.” It is a Book which can never lose its interest for men until the last conflict in the long strife of doubt has led in

the final victory of faith ; and seems, in especial, to adapt itself to the conditions and wants of the present age. It deals with the very questions which are in all our minds, and offers a solution of them, and, so far as I know, the only solution, in which those who have "eternity in their hearts" can rest. May all who study it, with such help as the following pages afford, find rest to their souls, and be drawn from the heat and strife of thought into the calm and hallowed sanctuary which it throws open to our erring feet.

THE HOLME, HASTINGS,

*October 1890.*



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## INTRODUCTION.



§ I. *ON THE AUTHORSHIP, FORM, DESIGN, AND  
CONTENTS OF THE BOOK.*

THOSE who raise the question, “Is life worth living?” answer it by—living on; for no man lives simply to proclaim what a worthless and wretched creature he is. But for the most part the question is mooted in a merely academical and not very sincere spirit. And to the dainty and fastidious pessimist who goes about to imply his own superiority by declaring that the world which contents his fellows is not good enough for him, there still seems no better reply than the rough but rousing and wholesome rebuke which Epictetus gave to such as he some nineteen centuries ago, reminding them that there were many exits from the theatre of life, and advising them, if they disliked the “show,” to retire from it by the nearest door of escape, and to make room for spectators of a more modest and grateful spirit.

Of the pessimists of his time he demands, “Was it not God who brought you here? And as what did He

bring you? Was it not as a mortal? Was it not as one who was to live with a little portion of flesh upon the earth, and to witness his administration—to behold the great spectacle around you for a little while? After you have beheld the solemn and august spectacle as long as is permitted you, will you not depart when He leads you out, adoring and thankful for what you have heard and seen? For you the solemnity is over. Go away, then, like a modest and grateful person. Make room for others."

"But why," urges the pessimist, "did He bring me into the world on these hard terms?"

"Oh!" replies Epictetus, "if you don't like the terms, it is always in your power to leave them. *He* has no need of a discontented spectator. He will not miss you much, nor we either."

But if any man lift the question into a more sincere and noble form by asking, "*How* may life be made worth living, or *best* worth living?"—in other words, "*What* is the true ideal, and what the chief good, of man?"—he will find no nobler answer to it, and none more convincingly and persuasively put, than that contained in this Scripture, which modern pessimists are apt to quote whenever they want to "approve" their melancholy hypothesis "with a text." From Schopenhauer downward, this Book is constantly cited by them as if it confirmed the conclusion for which they con-

tend, Taubert even going so far as to find "a catechism of pessimism" in it. Their assumption, however, is based on a total misapprehension of the design and drift of Ecclesiastes of which no scholar should have been guilty, and of which it is hard to see how any scholar could have been guilty had he studied it as a whole, instead of carrying away from it only what he wanted. So far from lending any countenance to their conclusion of despair, it frankly traverses it—as I hope to show, and as many have shown before me—and lands us in its very opposite; the conclusion of the whole matter with the Hebrew Preacher being, that whoso cultivates the virtues of charity, diligence, and cheerfulness, because God is in heaven and rules over all, *he* will not only find life well worth living, but will pursue its loftiest ideal and touch its true blessedness.

When scholars and "philosophers" have fallen into a mistake so radical and profound, it is not surprising that the unlettered should have followed their leaders into the ditch, and taken this Scripture to be the most melancholy in the Sacred Canon, instead of one of the most consolatory and inspiriting, for want of apprehending its true aim. Beyond all doubt, there is a prevailing ground-tone of sadness in the Book; for through by far the larger part of its course it has to deal with some of the saddest facts of human life—with the errors which divert men from their true aim, and

plunge them into a various and growing misery. But the voice which sinks so often into this tone of sadness is the voice of a most brave and cheerful spirit, a spirit whose counsels can only depress us if we are seeking our chief good where it cannot be found. For the Preacher, as we shall see, does not condemn the wisdom or the mirth, the devotion to business or the acquisition of wealth, in which most men find "the chief good and market of their time," as in themselves vanities. He approves of them ; he shows us how we may so pursue and so use them as to find them very pleasant and wholesome ; how we may so dispense with them, if they prove beyond our reach, as none the less to enjoy a very true and abiding content. His constant and recurring moral is that we *are* to enjoy our brief day on earth ; that God *meant* us to enjoy it ; that we are to be up and doing, with a heart for any strife, or toil, or pleasure ; not to sit still and weep over broken illusions and defeated hopes. Our lower aims and possessions become vanities to us only when we seek in them that supreme satisfaction which He who has "put eternity into our hearts" designed us to find only in Him and in serving Him. If we love and serve Him, if we gratefully acknowledge Him to be the Author of "every good gift and every perfect boon," if we seek first his kingdom and righteousness ; in fine, if we are Christian in more than name, the study of this Book should not

make us sad. We should find in it a confirmation of our most intimate convictions, and incentives to act upon them. But if we do not hold our wisdom, our mirth, our labour, our wealth as the gifts and ordinances of God for our good, if we permit them to usurp his seat and become as gods to us, then indeed this Book will be sad enough for us, but no whit sadder than our lives. It will be sad, and will make us sad, yet only that it may lead us to repentance, and through repentance to a true and lasting joy.

It is to be feared that the popular misconception of this singular and most instructive Scripture goes much farther than this, and extends to questions much more superficial than that of the temper or spirit it breathes. If, for example, the average reader of the Bible were asked, Who wrote this Scripture ? when was it written ? to whom was it addressed ? what is its general scope and design ? his answer, I suppose, would be : "Solomon wrote this Book ; of course, therefore, it was written in his lifetime, and addressed to the men over whom he ruled ; and his design in writing it was to reveal his own experience of life for their instruction." And yet in all probability no one of these answers is true, or anywhere near the truth. According to the most competent judges, the Book Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, nor for cen-

turies after his death ; it was addressed to a generation of feeble and oppressed captives, who had been carried away into exile, or had lately returned from it, and not to the free prosperous nation which rose to its highest pitch in the reign of the Wise King. It is a dramatic representation of the experience of a Jewish sage, who deliberately set himself to discover and pursue the chief good of man in all the provinces and along all the avenues in which it is commonly sought, eked out by what he supposed or tradition reported Solomon's experience to have been ; and its design was to comfort men who were groaning under the heaviest wrongs of Time with the bright hope of Immortality.

To scholars versed in the niceties of the Oriental languages, the most convincing proof of the comparatively modern date and authorship of the Book is to be found in its words, and idioms, and style. The base forms of Hebrew and the large intermixture of foreign terms, phrases, and turns of speech which characterize it—these, with the absence of the nobler rhythmic forms of Hebrew poetry, are held to be a conclusive demonstration that it was written during the Rabbinical period, at a time long subsequent to the Augustan age in which Solomon lived and wrote. The critics and commentators whose names stand highest<sup>1</sup> tell us

<sup>1</sup> Rosenmüller, Ewald, Knobel, De Wette, Delitzsch, Ginsburg, with many other competent judges, are agreed on this

that it would be just as easy for them to believe that Hooker wrote Blair's Sermons, or that Shakespeare wrote the plays of Sheridan Knowles, as to believe that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. And of course on such questions as these we can only defer to the verdict of men who have made them the study of their lives.

But with all our deference for learning, we have so often seen the conclusions of the ripest scholars modified or reversed by their successors, and we all know "questions of words" to be capable of so many different interpretations, that probably we should still hold our judgment in suspense, were there no arguments against the traditional hypothesis such as plain men use and can understand. There are many such arguments, however, and arguments that seem to be of a conclusive force.

As, for instance, this : The whole social state described in this Book is utterly unlike what we know to have been the condition of the Hebrews during the reign of Solomon, but exactly accords with the condition of the captive Israelites, who, at the disruption of the Hebrew monarchies, were carried away into Babylonia.

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point ; and even those who in part differ from them differ only in assigning the Book to a date still farther removed from the time of Solomon. There are but few scholars who now contend for the Solomonic authorship, and hardly any of these are, I think, in the first rank.

Under Solomon the Hebrew State touched its highest point. His throne was surrounded by statesmen of tried sagacity ; his judges were incorrupt. Commerce grew and prospered, till gold became as common as silver had been, and silver as common as brass. Literature flourished, and produced its most perfect fruits. And the people, though heavily taxed during the later years of his reign, enjoyed a security, a freedom, an abundance unknown whether to their fathers or to their children. "Judah and Israel were many in number as the sands by the sea, eating, drinking, and making merry. . . . And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon" (1 Kings iv. 20, 25). But as we read this Book we gather from it the picture of a social state in which kings were childish, and princes addicted to revelry and drunkenness (x. 16) ; great fools were lifted to high places and rode on stately horses, while nobles were degraded and had to tramp through the mire (x. 6, 7) ; the race was not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the learned (ix. 11). The most eminent public services were suffered to pass unrewarded, and were forgotten the moment the need for them was passed (ix. 14, 15). Property was so insecure that to amass wealth was only to multiply extortions, and to fall a prey to the

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cupidity of princes and judges, insomuch that the sluggard who folded his hands, so long as he had bread to eat, was esteemed wiser than the diligent merchant who applied himself to the labours and anxieties of traffic (iv. 5, 6). Life was as insecure as property, and stood at the caprice of men who were slaves to their own lusts; a hasty word spoken in the divan of any one of the satraps, or even a resentful gesture, might provoke the most terrible outrages (viii. 3, 4; x. 4). The true relation between the sexes was violated; the ruling classes crowded their harems with concubines, and even the wiser sort of men took to themselves any woman they desired; while, with cynical injustice, they first degraded women, and then condemned them as alike and altogether bad, their hands chains, their love a snare (vii. 26, 28; ix. 9). The oppressions of the time were so constant, so cruel, and life grew so dark beneath them, that those who died long ago were counted happier than those who were still alive; while happier than either were those who had not been born to see the intolerable evils on which the sun looked calmly down day by day (iv. 1-3). In fine, the whole fabric of the State was fast falling into ruin and decay, through the greed and sloth of rulers who taxed the people to the uttermost in order to supply their wasteful luxury (x. 18, 19); while yet, so dreadful was their tyranny and their spies so ubiqui-

tous, that no man dared to breathe a word against them even to the wife of his bosom and in the secrecy of the bed-chamber (x. 20): the only consolation of the oppressed was the grim hope that a time of retribution would overtake their tyrants, from which neither their power nor their craft should be able to save them (viii. 5-8).

Nothing would be more difficult than to accept this as a picture of the social and political features of the Hebrew commonwealth during the reign of Solomon, or even during those later years of his reign in which his rule grew hard and despotic. Nothing can well be more incredible than that this should be intended as a picture of his reign, save that it should be a picture *drawn by his own hand!* To suppose Solomon the author of this Scripture is to suppose that the wisest of kings and of men was base enough to pen a deliberate and malignant libel on himself, his time, and his realm! On the other hand, the description, dark and lurid as it is, exactly accords with all we know of the terrible condition of the Jews who wept in captivity by the waters of Babylon under the later Persian rule, or were ground under the heels of the Persian satraps after their return to the land of their fathers. In all probability, therefore, as our most competent authorities are agreed, the Book is a poem rather than a chronicle, written by an unknown Hebrew author,

during the Captivity or shortly after the Return, certainly not before B.C. 500, and probably somewhat later.<sup>1</sup>

Nor is this inference, drawn from the style and general contents of the Book, unsupported by verses in it which at first sight seem altogether opposed to such an inference. All the special and direct indications of authorship are to be found either in the first or in the last chapter.

The very first verse runs, "The words of the Preacher, son of David, King in Jerusalem." Now, David had only one son who was King in Jerusalem, viz. Solomon; the verse, therefore, seems to fix the authorship on Solomon beyond dispute. Nevertheless, the conclusion is untenable. For (1) in his known

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<sup>1</sup> The *fourth* century B.C. is, I think, its most probable date. In his recent exposition of Ecclesiastes, the Dean of Wells attempts to bring the date down to about B.C. 240. But his arguments are so curious and fanciful, and his conclusion is based so largely on conjecture, and on dubious similarities of phrase in the language of the Hebrew Preacher, and of some of the later philosophers of Greece, that I suspect very little weight will be attached to his gallant attempt to breathe new life into the moribund hypothesis of the ingenious Mr. Tyler. Delitzsch, for example, a high and recognized authority, declares that there is "not a trace of Greek influence" in this Scripture, though Dr. Plumptre finds so many. But though neither his hypothesis nor his confessedly conjectural biography of the unknown author carries the force of "sober criticism," there is much in his Commentary which will be found very helpful.

and admitted works the Wise King distinctly claims to be their author. The Book of Proverbs commences with "The Proverbs of *Solomon*," and the Canticles with "The Song of Songs, which is *Solomon's*." But the book Ecclesiastes does not once mention his name, though it speaks of a "son of David," *i.e.* one of David's descendants. Instead of calling this son of David Solomon, it calls him "Coheleth," or, as we translate the word, "The Preacher." Now, the word Coheleth<sup>1</sup> is not a masculine noun, as the name of a man should be, but the feminine participle of an unused conjugation of a Hebrew verb which means "to collect," or "to call together." It denotes, not an actual man, but an abstraction, a personification, and is probably intended to denote one who calls a congregation round him, *i.e.* a preacher, *any* preacher, preacher *in the abstract*. (2) This "son of David," we are told, was "King *in Jerusalem*;" and the phrase implies that the Book was written at a time when there either were or had been kings *out of Jerusalem*, when Jerusalem was not the only site of a Hebrew throne, and therefore after the disruption of Solomon's realm into the rival kingdoms of Israel and Judah. (3) Again,

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<sup>1</sup> Plumptre writes the word Koheleth, and Perowne Quoheleth. Which of the three initial letters should be used is of little consequence, and hence I retain the form in most common use. *Ecclesiastes* is simply its Greek equivalent.

we find Coheleth affirming (i. 12), "I *was* King over Israel in Jerusalem," and (i. 16), "I acquired greater wisdom than *all* (*all kings*, *i.e.*, say the critics) who were before me in Jerusalem." But to say nothing of the questionable modesty of the latter sentence if it fell from the pen of Solomon, he was only the second occupant of the throne in Jerusalem; for Jebus, or Jerusalem, was only conquered from a Philistine clan by his father David. And if there had been only one, how could he speak of "*all*" who preceded him? (4) And still further, the tense of the verb in "I *was* King over Israel" can only carry the sense "I *was* King, but am King no more." Yet we know that Solomon reigned over Israel to the day of his death, that there never was a day on which he could have strictly used such a tense as this. So clear and undisputed is the force of this tense that the rabbis, who held Solomon to be the author of Ecclesiastes, were obliged to invent a fable or tradition to account for it. They said, "When King Solomon was sitting on the throne of his kingdom, his heart was greatly lifted up within him by his prosperity, and he transgressed the commandments of God, gathering to him many horses, and chariots, and riders, amassing much gold and silver, and marrying many wives of foreign extraction. Wherefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and He sent against him Ashmodai, the ruler of

the demons; and he drove him from the throne of his kingdom, and took away the ring from his hand (Solomon's ring is famous for its marvellous powers in all Oriental fable), and sent him forth to wander about the world. And he went through the villages and cities, with a staff in his hand, weeping and lamenting, and saying, "I am Coheleth; I was beforetime Solomon, and reigned over Israel in Jerusalem; but now I rule over only this staff." It is a pretty and pathetic fable, but it *is* a fable; and though it proves nothing else, we may fairly infer from it that, even in the judgment of the rabbis, the book Ecclesiastes must, on its own showing, have been written after Solomon had ceased to be King, *i.e.* after he had ceased to live.

In the Epilogue (xii. 9-12) the Author of the Book lifts the dramatic mask from his face, and permits us to see who he really is; a mask, let me add, somewhat carelessly worn, since we see nothing of it in the last ten chapters of the Book. Although he has written in a feigned name, and, without asserting it, has so moulded his phrases, at least in the earlier chapters of his work, as to suggest to his readers that he is, if not Solomon himself, at least Solomon's mouthpiece, attributing the garnered results of his experience to one greater than himself, that they may carry the more weight—just as Browning speaks in the name of Rabbi Ben Ezra, for instance, or Fra Lippo Lippi,

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or Abt Vogler, borrowing what he can of outward circumstance from the age and class to which they belong, and yet really uttering his own thought and emotion through their lips—he now confesses that he is no king of an age long past, but a rabbi, a sage, a teacher, a master, who has both made some proverbs of his own and collected the wise sayings of others who had gone before him, in order that he might carry some little light and comfort to the sorely bested men of his own generation and blood.<sup>1</sup> In short, he has exercised his right as a poet, or “maker,” to embody the results of his wide and varied experience of life in a dramatic form, but is careful to let us know, before he takes leave of us, that it is a fictitious or dramatic Solomon, and not Solomon himself, to whom we have been listening throughout.

So that all the phrases in the Book which are indicative of its authorship confirm the inference drawn from its style and its historical contents ; viz. that it was not written by Solomon, nor in his reign, but by an unknown sage of a long-subsequent period, who, by a dramatic impersonation of the characteristic experiences of the son of David, or rather of his own experiences blended with the Solomonic traditions and poured into their

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<sup>1</sup> See the commentary on these verses for a fuller exposition of his real claims and position.

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moulds, sought to console and instruct his oppressed fellow-countrymen.

But perhaps the most convincing argument in favour of this conclusion is that, when once we think of it, we cannot possibly accept the Solomon set before us in Ecclesiastes as the Solomon depicted in the historical books of Scripture. Solomon the son of David, with all his wisdom, played the fool. The foremost man and Hebrew of his time, he gave his heart to "strange women," and to gods whose ritual was not only idolatrous, but cruel, dark, impure. In his pursuit of science, unless the whole East belie him, he ran into secret magical arts, incantations, divinations, an occult intercourse with the powers of ill. In all ways he departed from the God who had enriched him with the choicest gifts, and sank, through luxury, extravagance, and excess, first into a premature old age,<sup>1</sup> and then into a death so unrelieved by any sign of penitence, or any promise of amendment, that from that day to this rabbis and divines have discussed his final doom, many of them leaning to the darker alternative. This

"uxorious king, whose heart, though large,  
Beguiled by fair idolresses, fell  
To idols soul,"

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon could not have been more than sixty years of age when he died, yet it was not till he was "*old*" that his wives "turned away his heart from the Lord his God" (1 Kings xi. 4).

is the Solomon of history. But the Solomon of Ecclesiastes is a sage who represents himself as conducting a series of moral experiments for the good of mankind, in order that, with all the weight of manifold experience, he may teach men what is that good and right way which alone leads to peace. However hardly we may think of the Wise King who was guilty of so many follies, we can scarcely think of him as such a fool that he did not know his sins to be sins, or as such a knave that he deliberately endeavoured to palm them off on other ages, not as transgressions of the Divine Law, but as a series of delicate philosophic experiments which he was good enough to conduct for the benefit of the race.

On the whole, then, we conclude that in this Book Solomon is taken as the Hebrew type of wisdom, the wisdom which is based on large and varied experience; and that this experience is here dramatized, in so far as the writer could conceive it, for the instruction of a race which from first to last, from the fable of Jotham to the parables of our Lord, were accustomed to receive instruction in fictitious and dramatic forms. Its author was not Solomon, but one of "the wise" whose name can no longer be recovered; it was written, not in the time of Solomon, *i.e.* about 1000 B.C., but some five or six centuries later: and it was addressed not to the wealthy and peaceful citizens whose king held

his court in Jerusalem, but to their degenerate and enfeebled descendants during the period of the Persian supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

Doubtless many of the prevailing misapprehensions of the meaning, authorship, and animating spirit of the Book are due, in some measure, to the singular form into which it is thrown. It belongs to what is known as the Chokma, *i.e.* the Gnomic school, as opposed to the Lyrical school of Hebrew poetry. The Jewish, like Oriental literature in general, early assumed this form, which seems to have a natural affinity with the Eastern mind. Grave men, who made a study of life or who devoted themselves to a life of study, were likely to be sententious, to compress much thought into few words, especially in the ages in which writing was a somewhat rare accomplishment, or in which, as in the Hebrew schools, instruction was given by a living voice. No doubt they began with coining sage or witty aphorisms, generally lit up with a happy metaphor, each of which was complete in itself. Such sayings, as memorable and portable, no less than as striking for beauty and "matterful" for meditation, would commend themselves to an age in which books were

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<sup>1</sup> "It may be regarded as beyond doubt that it was written under the Persian domination" (Delitzsch).

few and scarce. They are to be found in abundance in the proverbs of all ancient races, and in the Book of Proverbs which bears the name of Solomon, and many of the more didactic and elaborate Psalms ; while the Book of Job preserves many of the sayings current among the Arabs and the Egyptians. But with the Hebrews this literary mode took what is, so far as I am aware, a singular and unparalleled development, from the time of Solomon onwards, rising to its highest pitch in the Book of Job, and sinking to its lowest—within the limits of the Canon at least—in the cramping over-ingenuities of the acrostic Psalms, and in such proverbs as those attributed to Agur the son of Jakeh.

This development has not as yet, I think, attracted the attention it deserves ; at least I have nowhere met with any formal recognition of it. Yet, undoubtedly, while at first the Hebrew sages were content to compress much wit or wisdom into the small compass of a *gnome*, which they polished like a gem, leaving each to shine by its own lustre and to make its own unaided impression, there rose in process of time men who saw new and great capacities in this ancient literary form, and set themselves to string their gems together, to arrange their own or other men's proverbs so aptly and artistically that they enhanced each other's beauty, while at the same time they compelled them

to carry a logical and continuous stream of thought, to paint an elaborate picture, to build up a lofty yet breathing personification (that of Wisdom, for example, in Proverbs viii.), to describe a lengthened and varied ethical experience (as in Ecclesiastes), and even to weave them into a large and sublime poem, like that of Job, which has never been excelled. The reluctance with which this form lends itself to the nobler functions of literature, the immense difficulty of the instrument which many of the Hebrew poets wielded, will become apparent to any one who should try the experiment. We have a goodly collection of proverbs, drawn from many sources, foreign as well as native, in the English tongue. Let any man endeavour so to set or arrange them, or a selection from them, as to produce a fine poem on a lofty theme, and he at least will not underrate the difficulty of the task, even though we should concede to him the right to *make* proverbs where he could not find them to his mind. Yet to many of the finest Hebrew poets the very restrictions of this form seem to have possessed a charm such as the far less rigid and encumbering laws of the sonnet, or even of the triolet and other fanciful poetic wares of modern times, have exerted on the minds of many of our own poets.<sup>1</sup> A careful student of the Chokma

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<sup>1</sup> The nearest analogy in English literature to this triumphant

school might even, I believe, trace the growth of this art, from its small beginnings in the earlier gnomic sayings of the Wise, to its culmination in the Book of Job; and, in so doing, would confer a boon on all students of Holy Writ.<sup>1</sup>

It is to this school that the Preacher belongs, as he himself informs us in the Epilogue to his fine Poem. He set himself, he says, "*to compose, to collect, and to arrange many proverbs*" (xii. 9), rejecting any that were not "words of truth," preferring, as was natural in a time so dark, such as were "words of comfort" (xii. 10), and seeking his sayings both from the sages who stood by the old ways and those who looked for the new (xii. 11). And, of course, the arranging of his awkward

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use of the proverb of which I can think is Pope's use of the couplet—in every way a much lesser feat, however; while its burlesque or caricature may be found in Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*.

<sup>1</sup> In the Book of Proverbs, for instance, he would find, in addition to the incomparable personification of Wisdom to which I have already referred, many examples of the proverb proper, many detached sayings whose underlying thought is illustrated by a stroke of imagination; such as that (chap. xxv. 11) in which the enhanced beauty of an appropriate word when spoken at the opportune moment is compared with the golden fruit of the orange when set in its frame of silver blooms (*Expositions*, vol. iv.). He would also find some of those small picturesque descriptions produced by an artistic sequence of proverbs—the same theme being sometimes worked over by different artists, in

and inelastic material was far more difficult than collecting it—arranging it so as to compel it to tell his story, and carry his argument to its lofty close. It is Story, the sculptor and poet, I believe, who says that “the best part of every work of art is unseen,” unexpressed, inexpressible in tones, or verse, or colours: it is that invisible something which lends it dignity, spirit, life, that “style” which, in this case, is in very deed the man. And the best part of Coheleth’s noble work is this art of arranging his gnomic sayings in the best order, the order in which they illuminate each other most brightly and contribute most effectively to the total impression. Hence, both in translating and in endeavouring to interpret him, whenever I have had to

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diferent ages, one and the same moral being enforced by wholly different designs; as, for instance, where Solomon (chap. vi. 6-11) enforces the duty of a forethoughtful industry by a picture of the ant and her prudent ways; while an unknown sage of a later date (chap. xxiv. 30-34) appends precisely the same moral, expressed in the same words, to his graphic picture of the Sluggard’s garden (*THE EXPOSITOR, Second Series*, vol. vi.). Moreover, if he turn to chapter xxx. he will see how this form of art, which once soared so high, was capable of sinking into a kind of puerile conundrum—with its three too wonderful things, and its four little things which yet are wise—while its moral tone remained pure and high. And, finally, in the exposition of the Epilogue to Ecclesiastes he will find how, after sinking so low, it rose once more, in the hands of the later rabbis, into many beautiful forms of fable, and exhortation, and parable.

choose between rival renderings or meanings, I have made it a rule to prefer that which most conduced to the logical sequence of his work or carried the finer sense, deeming that at least so much as this was due to so great a master, and entertaining no fear that I could invent any meaning which would outrun his intention.

In fine, if I were to gather up into a few sentences the impression which “much study” of this Scripture has left on my mind as to the manner in which the author worked upon it, I should say: that Coheleth, a man of much of Solomon’s original “largeness of heart” and a great lover of wisdom, set himself to collect the scattered sayings of the sages who were before him. He took the traditional story of Solomon as the ground and framework of his poem, at least at the outset, though he seems to have soon laid it aside, and endeavoured so to assort and arrange the proverbs he had collected that each would lead up to the next; while each group of them would describe some of the ways in which men commonly pursued the chief good, ways in most of which Solomon was at least reputed to have travelled far. Finding gaps which could not be well filled up from his large and various collection, he bridged them over with proverbs of his own composing, till he had got a sufficient account of each of the main adventures of that Quest. And, then, he put adventure

after adventure together in the order in which they best led up to his great conclusion.

In all this I have said nothing, it is true, of that "inspiration of the Almighty" which alone gives man understanding of spiritual things. But why should not "He who worketh all," and has deigned to use every form of literary art by which men teach their fellows, move and inspire a lover of wisdom to collect and arrange the sayings of the Wise, if by these he could carry truth and comfort to those who were in sore need of both? And where, save from heaven and from Him who rules in heaven, could Coheleth have learned the great secret—the secret of a retributive life beyond the grave? Even the best and wisest of the Hebrews saw that life only "as through a glass, darkly;" and even their fitful and imperfect conception of it seems always to have been—as in the case of David, Job, Isaiah—an immediate gift from God, and a gift so large that even their hands of faith could hardly grasp it. No one need doubt the inspiration of a Scripture which affirms, not only that God is always with us, passing a present and effective judgment on all we do, but also that, when this life is over, He will bring every deed and every secret thing into judgment, whether it be good or whether it be bad. That was not an everyday thought with the Jewish mind. We find it only in men who were moved by the Holy Ghost to accept the

teaching of his providence or the revelation of his grace.

As for the design of the Book, no one now doubts that it sets before us the search for the *summum bonum*, the quest of the Chief Good. Its main immediate intention was to deliver the exiled Jews from the misleading ethical theories and habits into which they had fallen, from the sensualism and the scepticism occasioned by their imperfect conception of the Divine ways, by showing them that the true good of life is not to be secured by philosophy, by the pursuit of pleasure, by devotion to traffic or public affairs, by amassing wealth ; but that it results from a temperate and thankful enjoyment of the gifts of the Divine bounty, and a cheerful endurance of toil and calamity, combined with a sincere service of God and a steadfast faith in that future life in which all wrongs will be righted and all the problems which now task and afflict us will receive a triumphant solution. Availing himself of the historical and traditional records of Solomon's life, he depicts, under that disguise, the moral experiments which he has conducted ; depicts himself as having put the claims of wisdom, mirth, business, wealth, to a searching test, and found them incompetent to satisfy the cravings of the soul ; as attaining no rest nor peace until he had learned a simple enjoyment of simple pleasures, a patient constancy under

heavy trials, heartfelt devotion to the service of God, and an unwavering faith in the life to come.

The contents of the Poem are, or may be, distributed into a Prologue, Four Acts or Sections, and an Epilogue.

In the Prologue (chap. i., vv. 1-11), Coheleth states the Problem to be solved.

In the First Section (chap. i., ver. 12—chap. ii., ver. 26), he depicts the endeavour to solve it by seeking the Chief Good in Wisdom and in Pleasure.

In the Second Section (chap. iii., ver. 1—chap. v., ver. 20), the Quest is pursued in Traffic and Political Life.

In the Third Section (chap. vi., ver. 1—chap. viii., ver. 15), the Quest is carried into Wealth and the Golden Mean.

In the Fourth Section (chap. viii., ver. 16—chap. xii., ver. 7), the Quest is achieved, and the Chief Good found to consist in a tranquil and cheerful enjoyment of the present, combined with a cordial faith in the future, life.

And in the Epilogue (chap. xii., vv. 8-14) he summarises and emphatically repeats this solution of the Problem.

It was very natural that the Problem here discussed should fill a large space in Hebrew thought and

literature ; that it should be the theme of many of the Psalms and of many of the prophetic "burdens," as well as of the Books Ecclesiastes and Job. For the Mosaic revelation did teach that virtue and vice would meet suitable rewards now, in this present time. At the giving of the Law Jehovah announced that He would show mercy to the thousands of those who kept his commandments, and that He would visit the iniquities of the disobedient upon them. The Law that came by Moses is crowded with promises of temporal good to the righteous, and with threatenings of temporal evil to the unrighteous. The fulfilment of these threatenings and promises is carefully marked in the Hebrew chronicles ; it is the supplication which breathes through the recorded prayers of the Hebrew race, and the theme of their noblest songs ; it is their hope and consolation under the heaviest calamities. What, then, could be more bewildering to a godly and reflective Jew than to discover that this fundamental article of his faith was questionable, nay, that it was contradicted by the commonest facts of human life as life grew more complex and involved ? When he saw the righteous drivén before the blasts of adversity like a withered leaf, while the wicked lived out all their days in mirth and affluence ; when he saw the only nation that attempted obedience to the Law groaning under the miseries of a captivity embittered by the cruel

caprices of rulers who could not even rule themselves, and unrelieved by any hope of deliverance, while heathen races revelled in the lusts of sense and power unrebuked: when *this* seemed to be the rule of providence, the *law* of the Divine administration, and not that better rule revealed in his Scriptures, is it any wonder that, forgetting all corrective and balancing facts, he was racked with torments of perplexity; that, while some of his fellows plunged into the base relief of sensualism, he should be plagued with doubts and fears, and search eagerly through all avenues of thought for some solution of the mystery?

Nor, indeed, is this problem without interest for us; for we as persistently misinterpret the New Testament as the Hebrews did the Old. We read that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap;" we read that "the meek shall inherit the earth;" we read that for every act of service done to Christ we shall receive "a hundredfold now, in this present time;" and we are very prompt with the gross, careless interpretation which makes such passages mean that if we are good we shall have the good things of this life, while its evil things shall be reserved for the evil. Indeed, we are trained—or, perhaps I should say, until recently we *were* trained—in this interpretation from our earliest years. Our very spelling-books are full of it, and are framed on the model of "Johnny was a good boy, and

he got plum-cake ; but Tommy was a bad boy, and he got the stick." Nearly all our story-books have a similar moral : it is always, or almost always, the good young man who gets the beautiful wife and large estate, while the bad young man comes to a bad end. Our proverbs are full of it, and axioms such as "Honesty is the best policy," a pernicious half-truth, are for ever on our lips. Our art, in so far as it is *ours*, is in the same conspiracy. In Hogarth, for instance, as Thackeray has pointed out, it, is always Francis Goodchild who comes to be Lord Mayor and poor Jem Scapegrace who comes to the gallows. And when, as life passes on, we discover that it is the bad boy who often gets the plum-cake, and the good boy who goes to the rod ; that bad men often have beautiful wives and large estates, while good men fail of both ; when we find the knave rising to place and authority, and honest Goodchild in the workhouse or the *Gazette*, then there rise up in our hearts the very doubts and perplexities and eager painful questions which of old time troubled the Psalmist and the Prophet. We cry out with Job—

" It is all one—therefore will I say it,  
The guilty and the guiltless He treateth alike ;  
The deceiver and the deceived both are his ; "

or we say with the Preacher,—

" This is the greatest evil of all that is done under the sun  
That there is one fate for all ;

The same fate beseecheth to the righteous and to the wicked,  
To the good and pure and to the impure,  
To him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not :  
As is the good so is the sinner,  
And he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath."

And it is well for us if, like the Hebrew poet, we can resist this cruel temptation, and hold fast the integrity of our faith ; if we can rest in the assurance that, after all and when all is done, "the little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked ;" that God has something better than wealth and lucky haps for the good, and merciful correctives of a more sovereign potency than penury and mishaps for the wicked. If we have this faith, our study of Ecclesiastes can hardly fail to deepen and confirm it ; if we are not so happy as to have it, Coheleth will give us sound reasons for embracing it.

#### § 2. ON THE HISTORY OF THE CAPTIVITY.

If we may now assume the Book Ecclesiastes to have been written, not in the time of Solomon, but during, or soon after, the Babylonian Captivity, our next duty is to learn what we can of the social, political, and religious conditions of the two races among whom the Jews were thrown when they were carried away from the land of their fathers. That they learned much, as well as suffered much, while they sat by the

waters of Babylon ; that they emerged from their long exile with a profound attachment to the Word of God, such as their fathers had never known, and with many precious additions to that Word, is beyond a doubt. As plants grow fastest by night, so men make their most rapid growth in knowledge and in faith when times are dark and troubled. And all students of this period are at one in affirming that during the Captivity a radical and most happy change passed upon the Hebrew mind. They came out of it with a hatred of idolatry, a faith in the life beyond the grave, a pride in their national Law, a hope in the advent of the great Deliverer and Redeemer, with which the elder Psalmists and Prophets had failed to inspire them, but which henceforth they never wholly relinquished. With the religious there was blended an intellectual advance. Books and teachers were sought and honoured as never heretofore. Schools and synagogues grew up in every town and village in which they dwelt. “Of making of many books there was no end.” Education was compulsory. Study was regarded as more meritorious than sacrifice, a scholar as greater than a prophet, a teacher as greater than a king, if at least we may trust proverbs which were current among them. Before the Captivity one of the least literate of nations—noble as their national literature was, at its close the Jews were distinguished by their zeal for culture and education.

To trace the progress of this marvellous revival of letters and religion—a renaissance and a reformation in one—would be a most welcome task, had we the materials for it and the skill to use them. But even the scanty materials that exist lie scattered through the historical and literary remains of many different races—in the cylinders, sculptures, paintings, inscriptions, tombs, shrines of Nineveh, Babylon, Behistun, and Persepolis, in the Zendavesta, in the pages of Herodotus and the earlier Greek historians, in Josephus, in the Apocrypha, in the Talmud, and in at least a dozen of the Old Testament books; and some of these “sources” are very far as yet from having been explored and mastered. Hence the history of this period still remains to be written, and will probably be largely conjectural whenever, if ever, it is written. Yet what period is of graver interest to the student of the Bible? If we could recover its history, it would throw a new and most welcome light on well-nigh one-half of the Old Testament Scriptures, if not on all.

Happily, a brief sketch of it, such as is well within any man's reach, will suffice to show how, from their contact with the Babylonian and Persian races, the Jews received literary and religious impulses which go far to account for the marvellous changes which swept over them, and enable us to read the Preacher intelligently, and see how his social and political

allusions exactly correspond with what we know of the time.<sup>1</sup>

About a hundred and twenty years after the destruction of the kingdom of Israel by Shalmaneser, King of Assyria (B.C. 719), the kingdom of Judah fell before Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (B.C. 598-596). The city, palace, and temple of Jerusalem were levelled in a common ruin ; the nobles, priests, merchants, and skilled artisans, all the pith and manhood of Judah, were carried away captive ; only a few of the most abject of the people were left to mourn and starve amid the ravaged fields. Nothing could present a more striking contrast to their native land than the region to which the Jews were deported. Instead of a small picturesque mountain-country, with its little cities set on hills or on the brink of precipitous ravines, they entered on a vast plain, fertile beyond all precedent indeed, and abounding in streams, but with nothing to break the monotony of level flats save the high walls and lofty towers of one enormous city. For Babylonia proper was simply an immense plain, lying between the Arabian Desert and the Tigris, and of an extent somewhat under that of Ireland. But though

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<sup>1</sup> For this sketch I am largely indebted to Rawlinson's *Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, and his commentary on *Herodotus*.

of a limited area as compared with the vast empire of which it was the centre, by its amazing fertility it was capable of sustaining a crowded population. It was watered not only by the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, but by their numerous affluents, many of which were themselves considerable streams ; it was "a land of brooks and fountains." On this rich alluvial plain, amply supplied with water, and under the fierce heat of the sun, wheat and barley, with all kinds of grain, yielded a return far beyond all modern parallel. The capital city of this fertile province was the largest and the most magnificent of the ancient world, standing on both sides of the Euphrates, as London stands on both sides of the Thames, and covering at least a hundred square miles.

In this country and city (for "Babylon" stands for both in the Bible), so unlike the sunny cliffs and scattered villages of their native home, the Jews, who, like all hill-races, cherished a passionate affection for the land of their fathers, spent many bitter years. On the broad featureless plain they pined for "the mountains" of Judea (*Ezekiel xxxvi. ; Psalm cxxxvii.*) ; they sat down by the waters and wept as they remembered "the hill of the Lord." They do not seem, however, to have been handled with exceptional harshness by their captors. They were treated as colonists rather than as slaves. They were allowed to live

together in considerable numbers, and to observe their own religious rites. They took the advice of the prophet Jeremiah (xxix. 4-7), who had warned them that their exile would extend over many years, and built houses, planted gardens, married wives, and brought up children; they "sought the peace of the city" in which they were captives, "and prayed for it," knowing that in its peace they would have peace. If many of them had to labour gratuitously on the great public works—and this labour was exacted of most of the conquered races—many rose, by fidelity, thirst, diligence, to places of trust, and amassed considerable wealth. Among those who filled high posts in the household or administration of the successive monarchs of Babylon were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Mordecai; Tobit—if indeed Tobit be a real and not a fictitious person—and his nephew Achiacharus.

But who were the people, and what were the social and political conditions of the people, among whom the Hebrew captives lived? The two leading races with whom they were brought in contact were the Babylonians—an offshoot from the ancient Chaldean stock—and the Persians. The history of the Captivity divides itself into two main periods, therefore, the Persian and the Babylonian, at each of which we must glance.

1. *The Babylonian Period.*—For more than fifty years after they were carried away captive, the Jews served a Chaldean race, and were governed by Assyrian despots, of whom Nebuchadnezzar<sup>1</sup> was by far the greatest whether in peace or war. It is hardly too much to say that but for him the Babylonians would have had no place in history. A great soldier, a great statesman, a great builder and engineer, he knew how to consolidate and adorn his vast empire, an empire which is said to have “extended from the Atlantic to the Caspian, and from Caucasus to the Great Sahara.” We owe our best conception of the personal character and public life of this great despot to the Book of Daniel. Daniel, although a Jew and a captive, was the vizier of the Babylonian monarch, and retained his post until the Persian conquest, when he became the first of “the three presidents” of the new empire. He therefore paints Nebuchadnezzar from the life. And in his Book we see the great King at the head of a magnificent court, surrounded by “princes, governors, and captains, judges, treasurers, councillors, and sheriffs,” waited on by “well-favoured” eunuchs, attended by a crowd of astrologers and “wise men” who interpret to him the will of Heaven. He wields

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of *Nebuchadnezzar* Jeremiah and Ezekiel use the form *Nebuchadrezzar*, which is nearer to the original *Nabu-Kuduri-utzur*, i.e. “Nebo is the portector against misfortune.”

an absolute power, and disposes with a word of the lives and fortunes of his subjects, even the highest and most princely. All offices are in his gift. He can raise a slave to the second place in his kingdom (*Daniel*, to wit), and impose a foreigner (again, *Daniel*) on the priestly college as its head. Of so enormous a wealth that he makes an image of pure gold ninety feet high and nine feet broad, he lavishes it on public works—on temples, gardens, canals, fortifications—rather than on personal indulgence. Religious after a fashion, he wavers between “the God of the Jews” and the deity after whom he was named and whom he calls *his* god. In temper he is hasty and violent, but not obstinate; he suddenly repents of his sudden resolves; he is capable of bursts of gratitude and devotion no less than of fierce accesses of fury, and displays at times a piety and self-abasement astonishing in an Oriental despot. His successors—*Evil-Merodach*, *Neriglissar*, *Laborosoarchod*, *Nabonadius*, and *Belshazzar*—need not detain us. Little is known of them, and, with one exception, their reigns were very short; and their main task seems to have been the erection of vast and sumptuous structures such as *Nebuchadnezzar* had been wont to rear. Probably none of the Babylonian monarchs save *Nebuchadnezzar* made any deep impression on the Hebrew mind.

And, indeed, the people of Babylon were much more

likely than their despots to influence the Hebrew captives; for with them they would be brought into daily contact. Now the Babylonians were marked by a singular intellectual ability. Keen to know, patient to observe, exact and laborious in their researches, they could hardly fail to teach much to subject races, and to inspire them with some desire for knowledge. They had carried the sciences of mathematics and astronomy to a high pitch of perfection. They are said to have determined, within two seconds, the exact length of the solar year, and not to have been far wrong in the distances at which they computed the sun, moon and planets from the earth; and they compiled a serviceable catalogue of the fixed stars. The Hebrew prophets often refer to their "wisdom and learning." They excelled in architecture. Two of their vast works, the walls of Babylon, and the hanging gardens, were reckoned among "the seven wonders" of the ancient world. Their skill in manufacturing and arranging enamelled bricks has never yet been equalled.<sup>1</sup> In all mechanical arts, indeed, such as cutting stones and gems, casting gold and silver, blowing glass, modelling vases and ware, weaving carpets and muslins and linen, they take a very high place among the nations of

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<sup>1</sup> There is a curious allusion to these enamelled bricks, and the admiration the Jews conceived for them, in Ezekiel xxiii. 14-16.

antiquity. With manufacturing and artistic skill they combined the spirit of enterprise and adventure which leads to commerce. They were addicted to maritime pursuits; the "cry," or joy, "of the Chaldeans is in their ships," says Isaiah (xlivi. 14); and Ezekiel (xvii. 4) calls Babylonia "a land of traffic," and its chief city "a city of merchants."

But a larger, and probably the largest, class of the people must have busied themselves with the toils of agriculture; the broad Chaldean plain being famous, from the time of the Patriarchs to the present day, for an amazing and almost incredible fertility. Wheat, barley, millet, and sesame, all flourished with astonishing luxuriance, the ground commonly yielding a hundredfold, two hundredfold, and even ampler rewards for the toil of the husbandman.

With these abundant sources of wealth at their command, the people naturally grew luxurious and dissolute. "The daughter of the Chaldeans," says Isaiah (xlvi. 1-8), "is tender and delicate," given to pleasures, apt to live carelessly; her young men, says Ezekiel (xxiii. 15), are dandies, "exceeding in dyed attire," painting their faces, and wearing earrings. Chastity, in our modern sense of the term, was unknown.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *Herodotus*, book i., chap. 199; *Strabo*, xvi., p. 1058; and the *Book of Baruch*, vi. 43.

The pleasures of the table and of the couch were carried to excess. Yet, like many other Eastern races, the Babylonians hid under their soft luxurious exterior a fierceness very formidable to their foes. The Hebrew Prophets (Hab. i. 6-8; Isaiah xiv. 16) describe them as “a bitter and hasty,” a “terrible and dreadful” people, “fiercer than the evening wolves,” a people whose tramp “made the earth tremble, and did shake kingdoms;” and all the historians of the time charge them with a thirst for blood which often took the most savage and inhuman forms.

Of the horrible licence and cruelty of the worship of Bel, Merodach, and Nebo, which did much to foster the fierce and cruel temper of the people, it is not necessary, it is hardly possible, to speak. Roughly taken, it was the service of the great forces of Nature by a wanton indulgence of the worst passions of man. It is enough to know that in Babylon idolatry took forms which made all forms of idolatry henceforth intolerable to the Jews; that now, once for all, they renounced that worship of strange gods to which they and their fathers had always hitherto been prone. This of itself was an immense advance, a great gain. Nor was it their only gain; for if by contact with the idolatrous Babylonians the Jews were driven back on their own Law and Scripture, their intercourse with a people of so active an intellect and a learning so deep

and wide led them to study the Word of Jehovah in a new and more intelligent spirit.

Nor is it less obvious that in the social and political conditions of the Babylonians we have a key to many of the allusions to public life contained in Ecclesiastes. The great empire, indeed, presents precisely those elements which, in degenerate times and under feebler despots, must inevitably develop into the disorder, and misery, and crime which Coheleth depicts.

2. *The Persian Period.*—The conquest of Babylon by the Persians, led by the heroic Cyrus, is, thanks to Daniel, one of the most familiar incidents of ancient history, so familiar that I need not recount it. By this conquest Cyrus—"the Shepherd, the Messiah, of the Lord," as Isaiah (xliv. 28; xlv. 1) terms him—became the undisputed master of well-nigh the whole known world of the time. Nor does he seem to have been unworthy of his extraordinary position. Of all ancient Oriental monarchs, out of the Hebrew pale, he bears the highest repute. Even the Greek authors, for the most part, represent him as energetic and patient, magnanimous and modest, and of a religious mind. Æschylus calls him "kindly" or "generous." Xenophon selected him as a model prince for all races. Plutarch says that "in wisdom, and virtue, and greatness of soul he appears to have been in advance of all

kings." Diodorus makes one of his speakers say that Cyrus gained his ascendancy by his self-command and good-feeling and gentleness. Simple in his habits, brave, and of a most just, humane, and clement spirit, he hated the cruel and lascivious idols of the East, and worshipped one only God, "the God of heaven." There is none like him in the antique world, none at least among the kings and princes of that world. And when, at the conquest of Babylon, he discovered in the captive Jews a race that also hated idols, and served one Lord, and knew a law of life as pure as his own, or even purer, we need feel no surprise either that he broke their bands in sunder and set them free to return to their native land, or that they saw in this pure and noble nature, this virtuous and religious prince, "a servant of Jehovah," and even a partial and shadowy resemblance to that Divine Deliverer and Redeemer for whose advent they had been taught to look.

Cyrus was sixty years of age when he took Babylon (B.C. 539), and died ten years after his conquest. He was succeeded by men utterly unlike himself, so unlike that the Persian nobles revolted from them, and placed Darius Hystaspes, the heir of an ancient dynasty, on the throne. As Cyrus was the soldier of the Persians, so Darius was their statesman. He it was who founded the "satrapial" form of administration ; *i.e.* instead of governing the various provinces of his empire through

native princes, he placed Persian satraps over them, these satraps being charged with the collection of the public revenue, the maintenance of order, and the administration of justice ; in fact, he governed the whole Eastern world very much as we govern India. The internal organization of his vast unwieldy empire was the great work of Darius through his long reign of six-and-thirty years ; but the event by which he is best remembered, and which proved to be fruitful in the most disastrous results to the State, was the opening of that fatal war with Greece, which at last, and under his feeble and degenerate successors, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and the rest, reached its close in the downfall of the Persian empire. We need not linger over the details of the story. It will be enough, for our purpose, to say that from the accession of Xerxes down to the conquest of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great—a stretch of a hundred and fifty years—that empire was declining to its fall. Its history towards the end was a mere succession of intrigues and insurrections, conspiracies and revolts. “Battle, murder, and sudden death” are its staple. The restraints of law and order grew ever weaker. The satraps were practically supreme in their several provinces, and used their power to extort enormous wealth from their miserable subjects. Eunuchs and concubines ruled in the palace. Manliness died out ; the Persians were no

longer taught "to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth;" cunning and treachery took its place. The scene grows more and more pitiful, till at last the welcome darkness rushes down, and hides the ignoble agony of perhaps the vastest and wealthiest empire the world has seen.

But we must turn from the despots and their adventures to form some slight acquaintance with the people, the Persian people who, by the conquest of Cyrus, became the ruling class in the empire, always remembering, however, that the Babylonians must have remained by myriads both in the capital and in the provinces, and would continue to exert their influence on Hebrew thought and activity.

In all moral and religious qualities the Persians were far in advance of the Chaldeans, though they were probably behind them in many civilized arts and crafts. They were famous for their truthfulness and valour. The Greeks<sup>1</sup> confessed the Persians to be their equals in "boldness and warlike spirit"—Æschylus<sup>2</sup> calls them "a valiant-minded people"—while they are lavish in praise of the Persian veracity, a virtue in which they themselves were notably deficient. To the Persians God was "the Father of all truth;" to lie

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<sup>1</sup> *Herodotus*, ix. 62.

<sup>2</sup> *Æschyl., Pers.*, 94.

was shameful and irreligious. They disliked traffic because of its haggling, equivocation, and dishonest shifts. "Their chief faults," and even these were not developed till they became masters of the world, "were an addiction to self-indulgence and luxury, a passionate *abandon* to the feeling of the hour whatever it might be, and a tameness and subservience in all their relations toward their princes which seem to moderns incompatible with self-respect and manliness." Patriotism came to mean mere loyalty to the monarch ; the habit of unquestioning submission to his will, and even to his caprice, became a second nature to them. The despotic humour natural in "a ruling person" was thus nourished till it ran to the wildest excess. "He was their lord and master, absolute disposer of their lives, liberties, and property, the sole fountain of law and right, incapable himself of doing wrong, irresponsible, irresistible—a sort of God upon earth ; one whose favour was happiness, at whose frown men trembled, before whom all bowed themselves down with the lowest and humblest obeisance." No subject could enter his presence save by special permission, or without a prostration like that of worship. To come unbidden was to be cut down by the royal guards, unless, as a sign of grace, he extended his golden sceptre to the culprit. To tread on the king's carpet was a grave offence ; to sit, even unwittingly, on his

seat a capital crime. So slavish was the submission both of nobles and of people that we are required on good authority to accredit such stories as these : wretches bastinadoed by the king's order declared themselves delighted that his majesty had condescended to remember them ; a father, whose innocent son was shot by the despot in pure wantonness, had to crush down his natural indignation and grief, and to compliment the royal archer on the accuracy of his aim.

Despising trade and commerce as menial and degrading, the ruling caste of a vast empire, with a monopoly of office and boundless means of wealth at their command, accustomed to lord it over subject races, of a high spirit and a faith comparatively pure, their very prosperity was their ruin, as it has been that of many a great nation. In their earlier times, they were noted for their sobriety and temperance. Content with simple diet, their only drink was water from the pure mountain streams ; their garb was plain, their habits homely and hardy. But their temperance soon gave place to an immoderate luxury.<sup>1</sup> They acquired the Babylonian vices, and adopted at least the licence of the Babylonian

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<sup>1</sup> "There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. . . . As soon as they hear of any luxury they instantly make it their own. . . . Each of them has several wives, and a still larger number of concubines."—(*Herodotus* book i., chap. 135).

rites. They filled their harems with wives and concubines. From the time of Xerxes onwards they grew nice and curious of appetite, eager for pleasure, effeminate, dissolute.

With the growth of luxury on the part of the nobles and the people, the fear of the despot, at whose mercy all their acquisitions stood, grew more intense, more harassing, more degrading. Xerxes and his successors were utterly reckless in their exercise of the absolute power conceded to them, and delegated it to favourites as reckless as themselves. No noble however eminent, no servant of the State however faithful or distinguished, could be sure that he might not at any moment incur a displeasure which would strip him of all he possessed, even if it did not also condemn him to a cruel and lingering death. Out of mere sport and wantonness, to relieve the tedium of a weary hour, the despot might slay him with his own hand. For the crime, or assumed crime, of one person a whole family, or class, or race might be cut off unheard. Of the lengths to which this cruelty and caprice might go we have a sufficient example in the Book of Esther. The Ahasuerus of that singular narrative was, there can hardly be any doubt, the Xerxes of secular history—the very names, unlike as they sound, are the same name differently pronounced by two different races.<sup>1</sup> And all that the

<sup>1</sup> Their common root is the Sanscrit *Kshatra*, a king; in the

Book of Esther relates of the despot who repudiates a wife because she will not expose herself to the drunken admiration of a crowd of revellers, who raises a servant to the highest honours one day and hangs him the next, who commands the massacre of an entire race and then bids them inflict a horrible carnage on those who execute his decree, exactly accords with the Greek narratives which depict him as scourging the sea for having broken down his bridge over the Hellespont, beheading the engineers whose work was swept away by a storm, wantonly putting to death the sons of Pythias, his oldest friend, before their father's eyes ; as first giving to his mistress the splendid robe presented to him by his queen, and then giving up to the queen's barbarous vengeance the mother of his mistress ; as shamefully misusing the body of the heroic Leonidas, and, after his defeat by the Greeks, giving himself up to a criminal voluptuousness and offering a reward to the inventor of any new pleasure.

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The Book Ecclesiastes was written certainly not before the reign of Xerxes (B.C. 486-465), and probably many years after it, a period in which, bad as were the conditions of his time, the times grew ever

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Persepolitan inscriptions this word appears as Ksérshé, and from this both the Hebrew *Achashuerash* (Ahasuerus) and the Greek *Xerxes* would easily be formed.

more lawless, the despotism more intolerable, the violence and licentiousness of the subordinate officials more unblushing. But at whatever period within these limits we may place it, all we have learned of the Babylonians and the Persians during the later years of the Captivity and the earlier years of the Exile (during which the Jews were still under the Persian rule) is in entire correspondence with the social and political state depicted by the Preacher. The abler and more kindly despots—as Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes—showed a singular favour to the Jews. Cyrus published a decree authorizing them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, and enjoining the officials of the empire to further them in their enterprise; Darius confirmed that decree, despite the malignant misrepresentations of the Samaritan colonists; Artaxerxes held Ezra and Nehemiah in high esteem, and sent them to restore order and prosperity to the city of their fathers and its inhabitants. But a large number, apparently even a large majority, of the Jews, unable or disinclined to return, remained in the various provinces of the great empire, and were of course subject to the violence and injustice from which the Persians themselves were not exempt. “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” cries the Preacher till we grow weary of the mournful refrain. Might he not well take that tone in a time so out of joint, so lowering, so dark?

The Book is full of allusions to the Persian luxury, to the Persian forms of administration, above all, to the corruptions of the later years of the Persian empire, and the miseries they bred. Coheleth's elaborate description (ii. 4-8) of the infinite variety of means by which he sought to allure his heart unto mirth—his palaces, vineyards, paradises, with their reservoirs and fountains, crowds of attendants, treasures of gold and silver, the harem full of beauties of all races—seems taken direct from the ample state of some luxurious Persian grandee. His picture of the public administration (v. 8, 9), in which “superior watcheth over superior, and superiors again watch over them,” is a graphic sketch of the satrapial system, with its official hierarchy rising grade above grade, which was the work of Darius.<sup>1</sup> When the animating and controlling spirit of that system was taken away, when weak foolish despots sat on the throne, and despots just as foolish and weak ruled in every provincial divan, there ensued precisely that political state to which Coheleth perpetually refers.<sup>2</sup> Iniquity

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<sup>1</sup> “The political condition of the people which this Book presupposes is that in which they are placed under satraps” (Delitzsch).

<sup>2</sup> It would be possible to collect from the Psalms of this date materials for a description of the wrongs and miseries inflicted on the Jews, and of their keen sense of them, quite as graphic and intense as that of the Preacher. Here are a few phrases

sat in the place of judgment, and in the place of equity there was iniquity (iii. 16); kings grew childish, and princes spent their days in revelry (x. 16); fools were lifted to high place, while nobles were degraded; and slaves rode on horses, while their quondam

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hastily culled from them. The oppressors of Israel are described as being "clothed with cruelty as with a garment," as "returning evil for good, and hatred for good-will."

"Lift up thyself, thou Judge of the earth ;  
Render to the proud their desert.  
They prate, they speak arrogantly ;  
All the workers of iniquity boast themselves.  
They break in pieces Thy people, O Lord,  
And afflict Thine heritage.  
They slay the widow and the stranger,  
And murder the fatherless.  
And they say, The Lord shall not see,  
Neither shall the God of Jacob consider" (xciv.).

"I am bowed down and brought very low ;  
I go mourning all the day long :  
Truly I am nigh unto falling,  
And my heaviness is ever before me" (xxxviii.).

"My days consume away like smoke,  
And my bones are burned up like as a firebrand ;  
My heart is smitten down and withered like grass,  
So that I forgot to eat my bread" (cii.).

"I am helpless and poor,  
And my heart is wounded within me" (cix.).

Most of the "imprecatory" Psalms belong to this period; and the terrible wrongs of the Captivity, though they may not justify, in large measure explain and excuse, that desire for vengeance which has given so much offence to some of our modern critics.

masters tramped through the mire (x. 6, 7). There was no fair reward for faithful service (ix. 11). Death brooded in the air, and might fall suddenly and unforeseen on any head, however high (ix. 12). To correct a public abuse was like pulling down a wall: some of the stones were sure to fall on the reformer's feet, from some cranny a serpent was sure to start out and bite him (x. 8, 9). To breathe a word against a ruler, even in the strictest privacy, was to run the hazard of destruction (x. 20). A resentful gesture, much more a rebellious word, in the divan was enough to ensure outrage. In short, the whole political fabric was fast falling into disrepair and decay, the rain leaking through the rotting roof, while the miserable people were ground down with ruinous exactions, in order that their rulers might revel on undisturbed (x. 18, 19). It is under such a pernicious and ominous maladministration of public affairs, and the appalling miseries it breeds, that there springs up in the hearts of men that fatalistic and hopeless temper to which Coheleth gives frequent expression. Better never to have been born than to live a life so cramped and thwarted, so full of perils and fears! Better to snatch at every pleasure, however poor and brief, than seek, by self-denial, by virtue, by integrity, to accumulate a store which the first petty tyrant who gets wind of it will sweep off, or a reputation for

wisdom and goodness which will be no protection from, which will be only too likely to provoke, the despotic humours of men “dressed in a little brief authority.”

If even Shakespeare,<sup>1</sup> in an unrestful and despairing mood strangely foreign to his serene temperament, beheld

“desert a beggar born,  
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity, . . .  
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,  
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,  
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,  
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,  
And strength by limping sway disabled,  
And art made tongue-tied by authority,  
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,  
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,  
And captive good attending captain ill ;”

if, “tired with all these,” he cried for “restful death,” we can hardly wonder that the Preacher, who had fallen on times so evil that, compared with his, Shakespeare’s were good, should prefer death to life.

But there is another side to this sad story of the Captivity, another and a nobler side. If the Jews suffered much from Persian misrule, they learned much and gained much from the Persian faith. In its earlier form the religious creed whose documents Zoroaster

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<sup>1</sup> Sonnets, LXVI.

afterwards collected and enlarged in the Zendavesta was probably the purest of the ancient heathen world; and even when it was corrupted by the baser additions of later times, its purer form was still preserved in songs (*Gâthâs*) and traditions. There can be no reasonable doubt that it largely affected the subsequent faith of the Hebrews, not indeed teaching them any truth they had not been taught before, but constraining them to recognize truths in their Scriptures which hitherto they had passed over or neglected.

In its inception the Persian creed and practice were a revolt against the sensuous and sensual worship of the great forces of Nature into which most Eastern religions, often pure enough in their primitive forms, had degenerated, and, in especial, from the base forms into which the Hindus had degraded that primitive faith which is still to be recovered from the Rig-Veda. It acknowledged persons, real spiritual intelligences, in place of mere natural powers; and it drew moral distinctions between them, dividing these ruling intelligences into good and bad, pure and impure, benignant and malevolent,—an immense advance on the mere admiration of whatever was strong. Nay, in some sense, the Persian faith affirmed monotheism against polytheism; for it asserted that one Great Intelligence ruled over all other intelligences, and through them over the universe. This Supreme Intelligence, which the Persians

called Ahura-mazda (Ormazd), is the true Creator, Preserver, Governor, of all spirits, all men, all worlds. He is "good," "holy," "pure," "true," "the Father of all truth," "the best Being of all," "the Master of Purity," "the Source and Fountain of all good." On the righteous He bestows "the good mind" and everlasting happiness; while He punishes and afflicts the evil. His worshippers were to the last degree intolerant of idolatry. They suffered no image to profane their temples; their earliest symbol of Deity is almost as pure and abstract as a mathematical sign, a circle with wings; the circle to denote the eternity of God, and the wings his omnipresence. Under this Supreme Lord, "the God of heaven," they admitted inferior beings, angels and archangels, whose names mark them out as personified Divine attributes, or as faithful servants who administer some province of the Divine empire.

To win the favour of the God of heaven it was requisite to cultivate the virtues of purity, truthfulness, industry, and a pious sense of the Divine presence; and these virtues must spring from the heart, and cover thought as well as word and deed. His worship consisted in the frequent offering of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving; in the reiteration of certain sacred hymns; in the occasional sacrifice of animals which, after being presented before Ormazd, furnished forth

a feast for priest and worshipper; and in the performance of a mystic ceremony (the *Soma*), the gist of which seems to have lain in a grateful acknowledgment that the fruits of the earth, typified by the intoxicating juice of the Homa plant, were to be received as the gift of Heaven. A sentence or two from one of the hymns<sup>1</sup> of which there are many in the Zendavesta, will show better than many words to how high a pitch Divine worship was carried by the Persians: "We worship Thee, Ahura-mazda, the pure, the master of purity. We praise all good thoughts, all good words, all good deeds which are or shall be; and we likewise keep clean and pure all that is good. O Ahura-mazda, thou true happy Being! We strive to think, to speak, and to do only such things as may be best fitted to promote the two lives" (*i.e.* the life of the body and the life of the soul).

In this course of well-doing the faithful were animated and confirmed by a devout belief in the immortality of the soul and a conscious future existence. They were taught that at death the souls of men, both good and bad, travelled along an appointed path to a narrow bridge which led to Paradise; over this bridge only pious souls could pass, the wicked falling from it into an awful gulf in which they received the due reward of

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<sup>1</sup> Haug's *Essays*, pp. 162-3, quoted by Rawlinson.

their deeds. The happy souls of the good were helped across the long narrow arch by an angel,<sup>1</sup> and as they entered Paradise a great archangel rose from his throne to greet each of them with the words, "How happy

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<sup>1</sup> This helpful angel is by no means peculiar to the Persian faith. All the imaginative races of antiquity conceived of a being more divine than man, though originally not equal to the gods, who guided the departed soul on its lonely journey through the dark interspaces of death. Theut conducted the released spirit of the Egyptian to the judgment-seat. Hermes performed the same kind office for the Greeks, Mercury for the Romans. Yama was the *nekropompos* of the Hindus, and the Persians retained the legend. The Rig-Veda represents him as the first man who passed through death to immortality, and as therefore the best guide of other men. Nor is it doubted that the Persians derived their belief in a future life from the primitive Hindu creed. If their faith was, as I have said, a revolt from the degenerate forms of Hindu worship, it was also a return to its more ancient forms, as religious reformations are apt to be. The fathers of the Aryan stock had an unwavering assurance of a future life. In his *Essay on the Funeral Rites of the Brahmans*, Max Müller cites a sort of liturgy with which the ancient Hindu used to bid farewell to his deceased friend while the body lay on the funeral pyre, which is, surely, very noble and pathetic: "Depart thou, depart thou by the ancient paths, to the place whither our fathers have departed. Meet with the ancient ones (the Pitrs); meet with the Lord of Death; obtain thy desires in heaven. Throw off thine imperfections; go to thy home. Become united with a body; clothe thyself in a shining form. Go ye; depart ye; hasten ye from hence" (Rig-Veda x. 14).

To which, as choral responses, might be added, "Let him depart to those for whom flow the rivers of nectar. Let him depart to those who through meditation have obtained the

art thou, who hast come to us from mortality to immortality!"

This wonderfully pure creed was, however, in process of time, corrupted in many ways. First of all, "the sad antithesis of human life," the conflict between light and darkness, good and evil—the standing puzzle of the world—led the votaries of Ormazd to *dualism*. Ormazd loved and created only the good. The evil in man, and in the world, must be the work of an enemy. This

victory, who by fixing their thoughts on the unseen have gone to heaven. . . . Let him depart to the mighty in battle, to the heroes who have laid down their lives for others, to those who have bestowed their goods on the poor" (Rig-Veda x. 154).

As the body was consumed on the pyre the friends of the dead chanted a hymn in which, after having bidden his body return to the various elements from which it sprang, they prayed, "As for his unborn part, do Thou, Lord (Agni), quicken it with Thy heat; let Thy flame and Thy brightness kindle it: convey it to the world of the righteous."

It was from this pure and lofty source that the Persians drew their faith in the better life to be.

Max Müller also quotes as the prayer of a dying Hindu woman, "Place me, O Pure One, in that everlasting and unchanging world where light and glory are found. Make me immortal in the world in which joys, delights, and happiness abide, where the desires are obtained" (Atharda Veda xii. 3, 17).

Cremation itself bore witness to the Hindu faith in immortality, since they held that "the fire which set free the spiritual element from the superincumbent clay, completed the third or heavenly birth," the second birth having been achieved when men set themselves to a faithful discharge of their religious duties.

enemy, Ahriman (Augrō-maniyus), has been seeking from eternity to undo, to mar and blast, the fair work of the God of heaven. He is the baleful author of all evil, and under him are spirits as malignant as himself. Between these good and evil powers there is incessant conflict, which extends to every soul and every world. It will never cease until the great Deliverer arise—for even of *Him* the Persians had some dim prevision—who shall conquer and destroy evil at its source, all things then rounding to their final goal of good.

Another corrupting influence had its origin in a too literal interpretation of the names given to the Divine Being, or the qualities ascribed to Him, by the founders of the faith. Ormazd, for example, had been described as “true, *lucid, shining*, the originator of all the best things, of the spirit in nature and of the growth in nature, *of the luminaries and of the self-shining brightness which is in the luminaries.*” From these epithets and ascriptions there sprang in later days the worship of the sun, then of fire, as a type of God—a worship still maintained by the disciples of Zoroaster, the Ghebers and the Parsees. And from this point onward the old sad story repeats itself; once more we have to trace a pure and lofty primitive faith along the grades through which it declines to the low, base level of a sensuous idolatry. The Magians, always the bitter enemies of Zoroastrianism, held that the four elements—fire, air,

earth, and water—were the only proper objects of human reverence. It was not difficult for them to persuade those who already worshipped fire, and were beginning to forget of Whom fire was the symbol, to include in their homage air, water, and earth. Divination, incantations, the interpretation of dreams and omens soon followed, with all the dark shadows which science and religion cast behind them. And then came the lowest deep of all, that worship of the gods by sensual indulgence to which idolatry gravitates, as by a law.

Nevertheless, we must remember that, even at their worst, the Persians preserved the sacred records of their earlier faith, and that their best men steadily refused to accept the base additions to it which the Magians proposed. Corrupt as in many respects many of them became, the conquest of Babylon was the death-blow to the sensual idol-worship which had reigned for twenty centuries on the Chaldean plain; it never wholly recovered from it, though it survived it for a time. From that date it declined to its fall: "Bel bowed down; Nebo stooped; Merodach was broken in pieces" (*Isa. xlvi. 1; Jer. l. 2*). The nobler monarchs of Persia were true disciples of the primitive creed of their race. It was similarity of creed which won their favour for the Hebrew captives. In the decree which enfranchised them (*Ezra i. 2, 3*)

Cyrus expressly identifies Ormazd, "the God of heaven," with Jehovah, the God of Israel; he says, "*The Lord God of heaven* hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He hath charged me to build *Him* a house at Jerusalem." Nor was this belief in one God, whose temple was to be defiled by no image even of Himself, the only point in common between the better Persians, such as Cyrus and Darius, and the better Jews. There were many such points. Both believed in an evil spirit tempting and accusing men; in myriads of angels, all the host of heaven, who formed the armies of God and did his pleasure; in a tree of life and a tree of knowledge, and a serpent the enemy of man; both shared the hope of a coming Deliverer from evil, the belief in an immortal and retributive life beyond the grave, and a happy Paradise in which all righteous souls would find a home and see their Father's face. These common faiths and hopes would all be points of sympathy and attachment between the two races; and it is to this agreement in religious doctrine and practice that we must ascribe the striking facts that the Persians, ordinarily the most intolerant of men, never persecuted the Jews; and that the Jews, ordinarily so impatient of foreign domination, never made a single attempt to cast off the Persian yoke, but stood by the declining empire even when the Greeks were thundering at its gates.

On one question all competent historians and commentators are agreed; viz. that the Jews gained immensely in the clearness and compass of their religious faith during the Captivity. That, which was the punishment, was also the term, of their idolatry; into that sin they never afterwards fell. Now first, too, they began to understand that the bond of their unity was not local, not national even, but spiritual and religious; they were spread over every province of a foreign empire, yet they were one people, and a sacred people, in virtue of their common service of Jehovah and their common hope of Messiah's advent. This hope had been vaguely felt before, and just previous to the Captivity Isaiah had arrayed it in an unrivalled splendour of imagery; now it sank into the popular mind, which needed it so sorely, and became a deep and ardent longing of the national heart. From this period, moreover, the immortality of the soul and the life beyond death entered distinctly and prominently into the Hebrew creed. Always latent in their Scriptures, these truths disclosed themselves to the Jews as they came into contact with the Persian doctrines of judgment and future rewards. Hitherto they had thought mainly, if not exclusively, of the temporal rewards and punishments by which the Mosaic law enforced its precepts. Henceforth they saw that, in time and on earth, human actions are not carried to

their final and due results ; they looked forward to a judgment in which all wrongs should be righted, all unpunished sins receive their recompense, and all the sufferings of the good be transmuted into joy and peace.

Now this, as we shall see, is the very moral of the Book Ecclesiastes, the triumphant climax to which it mounts. The endeavour of Coheleth is to show how evil and good were blended in the human lot, evil so largely preponderating in the lot of many of the good as to make life a curse unless it were sustained by hope ; to give hope by assuring the Hebrew captives that "God takes cognizance of all things," and "will bring every work to judgment," good or bad ; and to urge on them, as the conclusion of his Quest, and as the whole duty of man, to prepare for that supreme audit by fearing God and keeping his commandments. This was the light he was commissioned to carry into their great darkness ; and if the lamp and the oil were of God, it is hardly too much to say that the spark which kindled the lamp was taken from the Persian fire, since that too was of God. Or, to vary the figure, and make it more accurate, we may say that the truths of the future life lay hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures, and that it was by the light of the Persian doctrine of the future that the Jews, stimulated by the mental culture and activity acquired in Babylon, discovered them in the Word.

It is thus, indeed, that God has taught men in all ages. The Word remains ever the same, but our conditions change, our mental posture varies, and with our posture the angle at which the light of Heaven falls on the sacred page. We are brought into contact with new races, new ideas, new forms of culture, new discoveries of science, and the familiar Word forthwith teems with new meanings, with new adaptations to our needs ; truths unseen before, though they were always there, come to view, deep truths rise to the surface, mysterious truths grow simple and plain, truths that jangled on the ear melt into harmony ; our new needs stretch out lame hands of faith, and find an unexpected but ample supply ; and we are rapt in wonder and admiration as we afresh discover the Bible to be the Book for all races and for all ages, an inexhaustible fountain of truth and comfort and grace.

## TRANSLATION.



## THE PROLOGUE.

*IN WHICH THE PROBLEM OF THE BOOK IS  
INDIRECTLY STATED.*

CHAP. I., vv. 1-11.

- 1 THE words of the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher ;  
Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,
- 3 Since man hath no profit from all his labour  
Which he laboureth under the sun !<sup>1</sup>
- 4 One generation passeth, and another generation cometh ;  
While the earth abideth for ever.
- 5 The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down ;  
And panteth toward the place at which it will rise again.
- 6 The wind goeth toward the south, and veereth to the north ;

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<sup>1</sup> Just as we speak of this “sublunary world,” so “under the sun” is the characteristic designation of the earth throughout this Book.

It whirleth round and round ;

And the wind returneth on its course.

7 All the streams run into the sea, yet the sea is not full ;

To the place whence the streams came, thither they return again.

8 All things are weary with toil. Man cannot utter it.

The eye can never be satisfied with seeing,

Nor the ear with hearing.

9 What hath been will be,

And that which is done is that which will be done ;

And there is no new thing under the sun.

10 If there be anything of which it is said, "Behold, this is new !"

It hath been long ago, in the ages that were before us.

11 There is no remembrance of those who have been ;  
Nor will there be any remembrance of men who are to come

Among those that will live after them.

## FIRST SECTION.

### *THE QUEST OF THE CHIEF GOOD IN WISDOM AND IN PLEASURE.*

CHAP. I., v. 12, to CHAP. II., v. 26.

13 I, THE Preacher, was King over Israel,  
in Jerusalem : *The Quest in  
Wisdom.*  
13 And I applied my heart to survey  
and search by wisdom  
Into all that is done under heaven :  
This sore task hath God given to the children of  
men,  
To exercise themselves therewith.  
14 I have considered all the works that are done under  
the sun,

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VER. 13. *To survey and search into, etc.* The verbs indicate the broad extent which his researches covered, and the depth to which they penetrated.

VER. 14. *Vexation of spirit.* Literally, "striving after the wind." But the time-honoured phrase, "vexation of spirit," sufficiently expresses the writer's meaning; and it seems better to retain it than, with the Revised Version, to introduce the Hebrew metaphor, which has a somewhat novel and foreign sound.

And, behold, they are all vanity and vexation of spirit.

15 That which is crooked cannot be set straight,  
And that which is lacking cannot be made up.

16 Therefore I spake to my heart, saying,  
Lo, I have acquired greater wisdom  
Than all who were before me in Jerusalem,  
My heart having seen much wisdom and knowledge ;

17 For I had given my heart to find knowledge and wisdom.

I perceive that even this is vexation of spirit ;

18 For in much wisdom is much sadness,  
And to multiply knowledge is to multiply sorrow.

1 Then I said to my heart,  
Go to, now let me prove thee with  
mirth,  
And thou shalt see pleasure :  
And, lo, this too is vanity !

*The Quest in  
Pleasure.*  
Ch. ii., vv. i-ii.

VER. 17. *To find knowledge and wisdom* Both the Authorized and Revised Versions render "to know wisdom, and to know *madness and folly*." The latter clause, however, violates both the sense and the grammatical construction. The word translated "to know" is not an infinitive, but a noun, and should be rendered "knowledge;" the word translated "folly" means "prudence," and the word translated "madness" hardly means

2 To mirth I said, Thou art mad !  
 And to pleasure, What canst thou do ?

3 I thought in my heart to cheer my body with  
 pleasure,  
 While my spirit guided it wisely,  
 And to lay hold on folly,  
 Till I should see what it is good for the sons of  
 men to do under heaven,  
 Through the brief day of their life.

4 I gave myself to great works ;  
 I builded me houses ; I planted me vineyards ;

5 I made me gardens and parks,  
 And I planted in them all manner of fruit-trees ;

6 I made me tanks of water,  
 From which to water the groves :

7 I bought me men-servants and maid-servants,  
 And had servants born in my house.  
 I had also many herds of oxen and sheep,  
 More than all who were before me in Jerusalem :

8 I heaped up silver and gold,  
 And the treasures of kings and of kingdoms :

---

more than "folly." The text, too, seems corrupt. The sense of the passage is against it, I think, as it now stands ; for the design of the Preacher is simply to show the insufficiency of wisdom and knowledge, not to prove folly foolish. On the whole, therefore, it seems better to follow the high authority which arranges the text as it is here rendered. The Hebraist will find the question fully discussed in *Ginsburg*.

I got me men-singers and women-singers ;

And took delight in many fair concubines :

9 So that I surpassed all who were before me in  
Jerusalem,

My wisdom abiding with me ;

10 And nothing that my eyes desired did I withhold  
from them,

I did not keep back my heart from any pleasure ;

For my heart took joy in all my toil,

And this was my portion therefrom.

11 But when I turned to look on all the works which  
my hands had wrought,

And at the labour which it cost me to accomplish  
them,

Behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit,

And there was no profit under the sun.

:

12 Then I turned to compare wisdom      *Wisdom and  
with madness and folly—  
Pleasure  
compared.*

And what can he do that cometh after      Ch. ii.,vv. 12-23.  
the king

Whom they made king long ago ?—

13 And I saw that wisdom excelleth folly  
As far as light excelleth darkness :

14 The wise man's eyes are in his head,  
While the fool walketh blindly.

Nevertheless I knew that the same fate will befall both.

15 Therefore I spake with my heart :

"A fate like that of the fool will befall me, even me ;  
To what end, then, am I wiser ? "

And I said to my heart :

" This too is vanity,

16 For there is no more remembrance of the wise man than of the fool ;

For both will be forgotten,

As in time past so also in days to come :

And, alas, the wise man dieth even as the fool ! "

17 So life became hateful to me, for a sore burden was upon me,

Even the labour which I wrought under the sun ;

Since all is vanity and vexation of spirit :

18 Yea, I hated all the gain which I had gained under the sun,

Because I must leave it to the man who shall come after me,

19 And who can tell whether he will be a wise man or a fool ?

Yet shall he have power over all my gain

Which I have wisely gained under the sun :

This too is vanity.

20 Then I turned and gave my heart up to despair

Concerning all the gain which I had gained under  
the sun ;

21 For here is a man who hath laboured wisely, and  
prudently, and dexterously,  
And he must leave it as a portion to one who hath  
not laboured therein :

This also is vanity and a great evil ;

22 For man hath nothing of all his heavy labour,  
And the vexation of his heart under the sun,

23 Since his task grieveth and vexeth him all his days,  
And even at night his heart hath no rest :

This too is vanity.

24 There is nothing better for a man *The Conclusion.*  
than to eat and to drink, Ch. ii., vv. 24-26.

And to let his soul take pleasure in his labour.

But even this, I saw, cometh from God ;

25 For who can eat,  
And who enjoy himself, apart from Him ?

26 For to the man who is good before Him,  
He giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy ;  
But to the sinner He giveth the task to gather and  
to heap up,

That he may leave it to him who is good before  
God :

This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

## SECOND SECTION.

### *THE QUEST OF THE CHIEF GOOD IN DEVOTION TO THE AFFAIRS OF BUSINESS.*

CHAP. III., v. 1, to CHAP. V., v. 20.

1 THERE is a time for all things,  
And a season for every undertaking  
under heaven : *The Quest  
obstructed by  
Divine Ordin-  
ances ;*  
2 A time to be born, and a time to die ; Ch. iii., vv. 1-15.  
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up plants ;  
3 A time to kill, and a time to heal ;  
A time to break down, and a time to build up ;  
4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh ;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance ;  
5 A time to cast stones, and a time to gather up  
stones ;  
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from  
embracing ;  
6 A time to get, and a time to lose ;  
A time to keep, and a time to throw away ;  
7 A time to rend, and a time to sew ;  
A time to be silent, and a time to speak ;

8 A time to love, and a time to hate ;  
A time for war, and a time for peace :

9 He who laboureth hath therefore no profit from his labours.

10 I have considered the task which God hath given to the sons of men,  
To exercise themselves withal :

11 He hath made everything beautiful in its season ;  
He hath also put eternity into their heart ;  
Only they understand not the work of God from beginning to end.

12 I found that there was no good for them but to rejoice,  
And to do themselves good all their life ;

13 But also that, if a man eat and drink,  
And take pleasure in all his labour,  
It is a gift of God.

14 I found too that whatever God hath ordained continueth for ever ;  
Nothing can be added to it,  
And nothing taken from it :  
And God hath so ordered it that men may fear before Him.

15 That which is hath been,  
And that which is to be was long ago ;  
For God recalleth the past.

16 Moreover, I saw under the sun  
 That there was iniquity in the place  
 of justice,  
 And in the place of equity there was  
 iniquity.

*And by Human  
 Injustice and  
 Perversity.*  
 Ch. iii., v. 16-  
 Ch. iv., v. 3.

17 I said to mine heart :  
 "God will judge the righteous and the wicked,  
 For there is a time for everything and for every  
 deed with Him."

18 Yet I said to my heart of the children of men :  
 "God hath sifted them,  
 To show that they, even they, are but as beasts."

19 For a mere chance is man, and the beast a mere  
 chance,  
 And they are both subject to the same chance ;  
 As is the death of the one, so is the death of the  
 other ;  
 And both have the same spirit :  
 And the man hath no advantage over the beast,  
 For both are vanity :

20 Both go to the same place ;  
 Both sprang from dust, and both turn into  
 dust :

21 And who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth  
 upward,

VER. 21. The question is here, as so often in Hebrew, the

---

Or the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth?"

22 Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better for man

Than to rejoice in his labours;

For this is his portion:

And who shall give him to see what will be after him?

1 Then I turned to consider once more iv.

All the oppressions that are done under the sun:

I beheld the tears of the oppressed,

And they had no comforter;

And their oppressors were violent,

Yet had they no comforter:

2 And I accounted the dead who died long ago

Happier than the living who are still alive;

3 While happier than either is he who hath not been born,

Who hath not seen the evil which is done under the sun.

---

strongest form of negative. As in ver. 19 the Preacher affirms of man and beast that "both have the same spirit," and, in ver. 20, that "both go to the same place," so, in this verse, he emphatically denies that there is any difference in their destination at death.

4 Then too I saw that all this toil,  
 And all this dexterity in toil,  
 Spring from man's rivalry with his  
 neighbour :  
 This also is vanity and vexation of  
 spirit.

5 The sluggard foldeth his hands,  
 Yet he eateth his meat :

6 Better a handful of quiet  
 Than two handfuls of labour with vexation of spirit.

7 And again I turned, and saw a vanity under the  
 sun :

8 Here is a man who hath no one with him,  
 Not even a son or a brother ;  
 And yet there is no end of all his labour,  
 Neither are his eyes satisfied with riches :  
 For whom, then, doth he labour and deny his soul  
 any of his wealth ?  
 This too is vanity and an evil work.

9 Two are better than one,  
 Because they have a good reward for  
 their labour :

10 For if one fall, the other will lift up  
 his fellow ;  
 But woe to the lonely one who falleth  
 And hath no fellow to lift him up !

*It is rendered  
 hopeless by the  
 base Origin  
 of Human In-  
 dustries.*

Ch. iv., vv. 4-8.

*Yet these are  
 capable of a  
 nobler Motive  
 and Mode.*

Ch. iv., vv. 9-16.

11 Moreover, if two sleep together, they are warm ;  
     But he that is alone, how can he be warm ?

12 And if an enemy assail the one, two will withstand  
     him.  
     And a threefold cord is not easily broken.

13 Happier is a poor and wise youth  
     Than an old and foolish king  
     Who even yet has not learned to take warning ;

14 For he goeth forth from the prison to the throne,  
     Although he was born a poor man in the kingdom.

15 I see all the living who walk under the sun  
     Flocking to the youth who stood up in his stead ;

16 There is no end to the multitude of the people over  
     whom he ruleth :  
     Nevertheless those who live after him will not  
         rejoice in him ;  
     For even this is vanity and vexation of spirit.

1 Keep thy foot when thou goest to the  
     House of God ;  
     For it is better to obey than to offer  
         the sacrifice of fools,  
     Who know not when they do evil.

2 Do not hurry on thy mouth,  
     And do not force thy heart to utter words before  
         God ;

*So also a nobler  
and happier  
Mode of Wor-  
ship is open to  
men :*  
Ch. v., vv. 1-7.

For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth :  
Therefore let thy words be few.

3 For as a dream cometh through much occupation,  
So foolish talk through many words.

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God,  
Deser not to pay it ;  
For he is a fool whose will is not steadfast.  
Pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better that thou shouldest not vow  
Than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

6 Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin,  
And say not before the Angel, " It was an error :"  
For why should God be angry at thine idle talk  
And destroy the work of thy hands ?

7 For in many words, as in many dreams, there is  
vanity :  
But fear thou God.

8 If thou seest the oppression of the  
poor,  
And the perversion of justice in the  
State,

*And a more  
helpful and  
consolatory  
Trust in the  
Divine  
Providence.*

Ch. v., vv. 8-17.

VER. 6. *Before the Angel.* That is, before the Angel who, as the Hebrews thought, presided over the altar of worship, and who was present even when only two or three met for the study of the Law: to study the Law being in itself an act of worship.

Be not dismayed thereat ;  
For superior watcheth superior,  
And superiors again watch over them :  
9 And the advantage for the people is, that it ex-  
tendeth to all,  
For even the king is servant to the field.  
10 He that loveth silver is never satisfied with silver,  
Nor he that clingeth to riches with what they yield :  
This too is vanity ;  
11 For when riches increase they increase that con-  
sume them :  
What advantage then hath the owner thereof,  
Save the looking thereupon with his eyes ?  
12 Sweet is the sleep of the husbandman,  
Whether he eat little or much ;  
While abundance suffereth not the rich to sleep.  
13 There is a great evil which I have seen under the  
sun—  
Riches hoarded up by the rich  
To the hurt of the owner thereof :  
14 For the riches perish in some unlucky adventure,

---

VER. 9. Some commentators prefer another possible reading of this difficult verse : *But the profit of a land is every way a king devoted to the field*, i.e. a lover and promoter of good husbandry. This reading, however, does not, I think, harmonise so well with the context as that given above.

And he begetteth a son when he hath nothing in his hand :

15 As he cometh forth from the womb of his mother, Even as he cometh naked, So also he returneth again, And taketh nothing from his labour Which he may carry away in his hand.

16 This also is a great evil, That just as he came so he must go. For what profit hath he who laboureth for the wind ?

17 Yet all his days he eateth in darkness, And is much perturbed, and hath vexation and grief.

18 Behold, that which I have said holds good,— *The Conclusion.*  
Ch.v.,vv. 18-20.  
That it is well for man to eat and to drink And to enjoy the good of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun, Through the brief day of his life which God hath given him : For this is his portion.

19 And I have also said, That a man to whom God hath given riches and wealth, If He hath also enabled him to eat thereof,

And to take his portion and to rejoice in his labour;—

This is a gift of God :

20 He doth not fret because the days of his life are not many,

For God hath sanctioned the joy of his heart.

### THIRD SECTION.

#### *THE QUEST IN WEALTH AND IN THE GOLDEN MEAN.*

CHAPS. VI., VER. 1, TO VIII., VER. 15.

1 THERE is another evil which I have  
seen under the sun,  
And it weigheth heavily upon men :  
*The Quest in  
Wealth.*  
2 Here is a man to whom God hath  
given riches and wealth and abund-  
ance,  
So that his soul lacketh nothing of all  
that it desireth ;  
And God hath not given him the power to enjoy it,  
But a stranger enjoyeth it :  
This is vanity and a great evil.  
*He who makes  
Riches his  
Chief Good is  
haunted by  
Fears and Per-  
plexities :*  
3 Though one beget a hundred children,  
And live many years,  
Yea, however many the days of his years,  
Yet if his soul be not satisfied with good,  
Even though the grave did not wait for him,  
Better is an abortion than he :  
*Ch. vi., vv. 1-6.*

4 For this cometh in nothingness and goeth in darkness,  
And its memory is shrouded in darkness ;

5 It doth not even see and know the sun :  
It hath more rest than he.

6 And if he live twice a thousand years and see no  
good :—  
Do not both go to the same place ?

7 All the labour of this man is for his      *For God has*  
mouth ;      *put Eternity*  
Therefore his soul cannot be satisfied :      *into his Heart ;*  
*Ch. vi., vv. 7-10.*

8 For what advantage hath the wise man over the fool,  
Or what the poor man over the stately magnate ?

9 It is better, indeed, to enjoy the good we have  
Than to crave a good beyond our reach :  
Yet even this is vanity and vexation of spirit.

10 That which hath been was long since ordained ;  
And it is very certain that even the greatest is but  
a man,  
And cannot contend with Him who is mightier than  
he.

VER. 8. *The magnate.* Literally, "he who knoweth to walk before the living;" some "great person," some man of eminent station, who is much in the eye of the public.

VER. 9. *To enjoy the good we have*, etc. Literally, ‘Better is that which is seen by the eyes (the present good) than that which is pursued by the soul (the distant and uncertain good).’

11 Moreover there are many things which increase vanity : What advantage then hath man ? *And much that he gains only feeds Vanity ;*

12 And who knoweth what is good for man in life, The brief day of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow ? *Nor can he tell what will become of his Gains.*  
And who can tell what shall be after him under the sun ?

1 A good name is better than good nard, And the day of death better than the day of one's birth : *The Quest in the Golden Mean,*

2 It is better to go to the house of mourning Than to the house of feasting, Because this is the end of every man, And the living should lay it to heart : *The Method of the Man who pursues it.*  
Ch. vii., vv. 1-14.

3 Better is serious thought than wanton mirth, For by a sad countenance the heart is bettered :

4 The heart of the wise therefore is in the house of mourning, But in the house of mirth is the heart of fools.

---

VER. 2. "Because *this* is the end ;" i.e. the death bewailed in the house of mourning.

5 It is better for a man to listen to the reproof of the wise  
     Than to listen to the song of fools ;

6 For the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot :  
     This also is vanity.

7 Wrong-doing maketh the wise man mad,  
     As a bribe corrupteth the heart.

8 The end of a reproof is better than its beginning,  
     And patience is better than pride ;

9 Therefore hurry not on thy spirit to be angry :  
     For anger is nursed in the bosom of fools.

10 Say not, "How is it that former days were better than these ?"  
     For that is not the part of wisdom.

11 Wisdom is as good as wealth,  
     And hath an advantage over it for those who lead an active life :

12 For wisdom is a shelter,

---

VER. 6. *The laughter of fools*, etc. There is a play on words in the original which cannot be reproduced in English. Dean Plumptre, following the lead of Delitzsch, proposes as the nearest equivalents, "As crackling nettles under kettles," or "As crackling stubble makes the pot bubble."

VER. 11. *Those who lead an active life*. Literally, "those who see the sun," i.e. those who are much in the sun, who lead a busy active life, are much occupied with traffic or public affairs.

VER. 12. *Fortifieth the heart*; i.e. quickens life, a new life, a

And wealth is a shelter ;  
 But the advantage of wisdom is  
 That it fortifieth the heart of them that have it.

13 Consider moreover the work of God,  
 Since no man can straighten that which He hath  
 made crooked.

14 In the day of prosperity be thou content ;  
 And in the day of adversity  
 Consider that God hath made this as well as that,  
 In order that man should not be able to foresee that  
 which is to come.

15 In my fleeting days I have seen  
 Both the righteous die in his right-  
 eousness,  
 And the wicked live long in his wicked-  
 ness :

16 Be not too righteous therefore,  
 Nor make thyself too wise lest thou be abandoned ;  
 17 Be not very wicked, nor yet very foolish,

*The Perils to  
 which it ex-  
 poses him.*

(1) *He is likely  
 to compromise  
 Conscience :*

Ch. vii.,  
 vv. 15-20.

life which keeps the heart tranquil and serene under all chances and changes.

VER. 14. *In the day of prosperity*, etc. Literally, "in the day of good be in good." It may be rendered "in the good day be of good cheer." *This as well as that*; i.e. adversity as well as prosperity. God sends both in order that, not foreseeing what will come to pass, we may live in a constant and humble dependence on Him.

Lest thou die before thy time :

18 It is better that thou shouldest lay hold of this  
And also not let go of that ;  
For whoso feareth God will take hold on both.

19 This wisdom alone is greater strength to the wise  
Than an army to a beleaguered city ;

20 For there is not a righteous man on earth  
Who doeth good and sinneth not.

21 Moreover seek not to know all that is  
said of thee,  
Lest thou hear thy servant speak evil  
of thee ;

22 For thou knowest in thine heart  
That thou also hast many times spoken evil of others.

23 All this wisdom have I tried ;  
I desired a higher wisdom, but it was far from me ;

24 That which was far off remaineth far off,  
And deep remaineth deep :  
Who can find it out ?

(2) *To be in-  
different to  
Censure :  
Ch. vii.,  
vv. 21, 22.*

VER. 18. *This . . . and that.* *This* refers to the folly and wickedness of ver. 17, and *that* to the wisdom and righteousness of ver. 16. *Take hold on both.* Literally, "go along with both."

VER. 19. *This wisdom :* viz. the moderate common-sense view of life which has just been described. *Than an army,* etc. Literally, "Than ten (*i.e.* many) mighty men in a city."

VER. 21. *Seek not to know,* etc. Literally, "Give not thy heart (even if thy ears) to all words that are uttered."

25 Then I and my heart turned to know      (3) *To despise  
this wisdom ;  
Women ;  
Ch. vii.,  
vv. 25-29.*  
And diligently examine it—  
To discover the cause of wickedness, vice,  
And that folly which is madness :

26 And I found woman more bitter than death ;  
She is a net ;  
Her heart is a snare, and her hands are chains :  
Whoso is good before God shall escape her,  
But the sinner shall be taken by her.

27 Behold, what I have found, saith the Preacher—  
Taking things one by one to reach the result—

28 I have found one man among a thousand,  
But in all that number a woman have I not found :

29 Lo, this only have I found,  
That God made man upright,  
But that they seek out many devices.

1 Who is like the wise man ?      (4) *And to be  
indifferent to  
Public Wrongs.*  
And who like him that understandeth  
the interpretation of this saying ?  
The wisdom of this man maketh his  
face bright,  
And his rude features are refined.

VER. 1. *This saying : i.e. that which follows. And his rude features, etc. Culture lends an air of refinement to the face, carriage, manners.*

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2 I say then, Obey the king's commandment,  
And the rather because of the oath of fealty :  
3 Do not throw off thine allegiance,  
Nor resent an evil word,  
For he can do whatsoever he please ;  
4 For the word of a king is mighty ;  
And who shall say to him, "What doest thou ?"  
5 Whoso keepeth his commandment will know no evil.  
Moreover the heart of the wise man foreseeth a time  
of retribution—  
6 For there is a time of retribution for all things—  
When the tyranny of man is heavy upon him :  
7 Because he knoweth not what will be,  
And because no one can tell him when it will be.  
8 No man is ruler over his own spirit,  
To retain the spirit,

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**VER. 2. *The oath of fealty.*** Literally, "the oath by God." The Babylonian and Persian despots exacted an oath of loyalty from conquered races. Each had to swear by the god he worshipped.

**VER. 3. *Do not throw off*, etc.** Literally, "Do not hurry from his presence, or even stand up because of an evil word." To stand up in the divan of an Eastern despot is a sign of resentment ; to rush from it a sign of disloyalty and rebellion.

**VER. 7. *Because he knoweth not* ; i.e. the tyrant does not know.** The sense seems to be : Retribution is all the more certain because, in his infatuation, the despot does not foresee the disastrous results of his tyranny, and because no one can tell him when or how they will disclose themselves.

Nor has he any power over the day of his death ;  
 And there is no furlough in this war,  
 And no craft will save the wicked.

9 All this have I seen,  
 Having applied my heart to all that is done under  
 the sun.

10 But there is a time when a man ruleth over men to  
 their hurt.  
 Thus I have seen wicked men buried,  
 And come again ;  
 And those who did right depart from the place of  
 the holy,  
 And be forgotten in the city :  
 This also is vanity.

11 Because sentence against an evil deed is not exe-  
 cuted forthwith,  
 The heart of the sons of men is set in them to do  
 evil.

12 Though a sinner do evil a hundred years,  
 And groweth old therein,

VER. 9. *All this have I seen*; i.e. all this retribution on tyrants and the consequent deliverance of the oppressed.

VER. 10. But the Preacher has also seen times when retributive justice did *not* overtake the oppressors, when they *came again* in the persons of children as wicked and tyrannical as themselves.

VER. 11. *Because sentence*, etc. "God does not always pay on Saturdays," says an old Italian proverb.

Yet I know that it shall be well with those who  
fear God,

Who truly fear before Him ;

13 And it shall not be well with the wicked,

But, like a shadow, he shall not prolong his days,  
Because he doth not fear before God.

14 Nevertheless, this vanity doth happen  
on the earth,  
That there are righteous men who  
have a wage like that of the wicked,  
And there are wicked men who have a wage like  
that of the righteous :  
This too, I said, is vanity.

*Therefore the  
Preacher con-  
demns this  
View of  
Human Life.*

15 And I commended mirth,  
Because there is nothing better for man under the  
sun  
Than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry ;  
For this will go with him to his work  
Through the days of his life,  
Which God giveth him under the sun.

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VER. 15. "And *this* will go with him :" viz. this clear enjoying temper, than which, as yet, the Preacher has found "nothing better."

#### FOURTH SECTION.

*THE QUEST OF THE CHIEF GOOD ACHIEVED.*

CHAP. VIII., VER. 16, TO CHAP. XII., VER. 7.

16 As then I applied my heart to acquire  
    wisdom,  
And to see the work which is done  
    under the sun—  
And such a one seeth no sleep with his eyes by  
    day or by night :

17 I saw that man cannot find out all the work of God  
    Which is done under the sun ;  
Though man labour to discover it,  
He cannot find it out ;  
And though the wise may say he understandeth it

VER. 17. To illustrate this verse Dean Plumptre happily quotes Hooker's noble and familiar words: "Dangerous it were for the feeble brain of man to wade far into the doings of the Most High; whom although to know be life, and joy to make mention of His name, yet our soundest knowledge is to know that we know Him not as indeed He is, neither can know Him, and our safest eloquence concerning Him is our silence, when we confess without confession that His glory is inexplicable, his greatness above our capacity and reach."

Nevertheless he hath not found it out.

1 For all this have I taken to heart and explored, ix.

That the righteous, and the wise, and their labours  
are in the hand of God :

They know not whether they shall meet love or  
hatred ;

All lies before them.

All are treated alike ;

2 The same fate befalleth to the righteous and to the  
wicked,

To the good and pure and to the impure,

To him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth  
not ;

As with the good so is it with the sinner,

With him that sweareth as with him who feareth  
an oath.

3 This is the greatest evil of all that is done under  
the sun,

*VER. 1. They know not whether they shall meet love or hatred*  
may mean that even the wisest cannot tell whether they shall  
meet (1) the love or the enmity of God, as shown in adverse or  
favourable providences ; or (2) the things which they love or hate ;  
or (3) the love or the hatred of their fellows. The last of the  
three seems the most likely.

*All lies before them ; i.e. all possible chances, changes, events.*  
Only God can determine or foresee what is coming to meet them.

*VER. 3. The words of this verse do not, as they stand, seem*  
to carry on the logical sequence of thought. The Preacher's  
complaint is that even the wise and the good are not exempted

That there is one fate for all :

And that, although the heart of the sons of men is  
full of evil,

And madness is in their hearts through life,

Yet, after it, they go to the dead ;

4 For who is exempted ?

To all the living there is hope,

For a living dog is better than a dead lion ;

5 For the living know that they shall die,

But the dead know not anything ;

And there is no more any compensation to them,

For the very memory of them is gone :

6 Their love, too, no less than their hatred and rivalry,  
hath perished ;

And there is no part for them in ought that is done  
under the sun.

7 Go, then, eat thy bread with gladness,      *Nor in Plea-*  
And drink thy wine with a merry      *sure:*  
heart,      Ch. ix., vv. 7-12.

Since God hath accepted thy works :

8 Let thy garments be always white ;

Let no perfume be lacking to thy head :

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from the common fate, not that the foolish and reckless are exposed to it. The text may be corrupt; but Ginsburg is content with it. A good reading of it, however, is still wanting.

9 And enjoy thyself with any woman whom thou lovest  
All the days of thy life  
Which He giveth thee under the sun,  
All thy fleeting days :  
For this is thy portion in life,  
And in the labour which thou labourest under the  
sun.

10 Whatsoever thine hand findeth to do,  
Do it whilst thou art able ;  
For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge,  
nor wisdom in Hades,  
Whither thou goest.

11 Then I turned and saw under the sun,  
That the race is not to the swift,  
Nor the battle to the strong ;  
Nor yet bread to the wise,  
Nor riches to the intelligent,  
Nor favour to the learned ;

12 But time and chance happen to all,  
And that man doth not even know his time :  
Like fish taken in a fatal net,

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VER. 9. "Enjoy thyself with *any* woman." The word here rendered "woman" does not mean "wife." And as the Hebrew Preacher is here speaking under the mask of the lover of pleasure, this immoral maxim is at least consistent with the part he plays. More than one good critic, however, read "a wife" for "any woman."

And like birds caught in a snare,  
 So are the sons of men entrapped in the time of  
     their calamity,  
 When it falleth suddenly upon them.

13 This wisdom also have I seen under      *Nor in Devotion to Public Affairs and its Rewards :*  
     the sun,  
 And it seemed great to me—

14 There was a little city,      Ch. ix., v. 13-  
     And few men in it,  
     And a great king came against it and besieged it,  
     And threw up a military causeway against it :      Ch. x., v. 20.

15 Now there was found in it a poor wise man,  
     And he saved that city by his wisdom ;  
     Yet no one remembered this same poor man.

16 Therefore say I,  
     Though wisdom is better than strength,  
     Yet the wisdom of the poor is despised,  
     And his words are not listened to :

17 Though the quiet words of the wise have much  
     advantage  
     Over the vociferations of a fool of fools,  
     And wisdom is better than weapons of war,  
     Yet one fool destroyeth much good :

1 As a dead fly maketh sweet ointment to stink,      x.  
     So a little folly overpowreth (much) wisdom and  
     honour.

2 Nevertheless the mind of the wise man turns toward  
his right hand,  
But the mind of the fool to his left;

3 For so soon as the fool setteth his foot in the  
street  
He betrayeth his lack of understanding;  
Yet he saith of every one (he meeteth), "He is a  
fool!"

4 If the anger of thy ruler be kindled against thee,  
Resent it not:  
Patience will avert a graver wrong.

5 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun,  
An outrage which only a ruler can commit:

6 A great fool is lifted to high place,  
While the noble sit degraded:

7 I have seen servants upon horses,  
And masters walking like servants on the ground.

*VER. 3. Setteth his foot in the street.* Literally, "walketh in the road." The sentence seems to be a proverb used to denote the extreme stupidity of the fool who, the very moment he leaves his house, is bewildered, cannot even find his way from one familiar spot to another, and sees his own folly in every face he meets.

*VER. 4. Resent it not.* Literally, "Quit not thy place."—See note on chapter viii., ver. 3.

*VER. 7.* To ride upon a horse is still a mark of distinction in many Eastern States. In Turkish cities, till of late, no Christian was permitted to ride any nobler beast than an ass or a mule: so neither were the Jews, in the Middle Ages, in any Christian city.

8 Yet he that diggeth a pit shall fall into it ;  
 And whoso breaketh down a wall a serpent shall  
 bite him ;

9 He who pulleth down stones shall be hurt there-  
 with ;  
 And whoso cleaveth logs shall be cut.

10 If the axe be blunt, and he do not whet the edge,  
 He must put on more strength ;  
 But wisdom should teach him to sharpen it.

11 If the serpent bite because it is not charmed,  
 There is no advantage to the charmer.

12 The words of the wise man's mouth win him grace ;  
 But the lips of a fool swallow him up,

VER. 10. Ginsburg renders this difficult and much-disputed passage thus : "If the axe be blunt, and he do not sharpen it beforehand, he shall only increase the army ; the advantage of repairing hath wisdom," and explains it as meaning : "If any insulted subject lift a blunt axe against the trunk of despotism, he will only make the tyrant increase his army, and thereby augment his own sufferings ; but it is the prerogative of wisdom to repair the mischief which such precipitate folly occasions." I have offered what seems a simpler explanation in the comment on this passage, and have tried to give a simpler, yet not less accurate, rendering in the text. But there are almost as many readings of this difficult verse as there are critics ; and it is impossible to do more than make a hesitating choice among them.

VER. 11. *The charmer.* Literally, "the master of the tongue." The allusion of the phrase is of course to the subtle cantillations by which the charmer drew, or was thought to draw, serpents from their "lurk," and to render them harmless.

13 For the words of his mouth are folly at the beginning,  
And end in malignant madness.

14 The fool is full of words,  
Though no man knoweth what shall be,  
Either here or hereafter :  
And who can tell him ?

15 The work of a fool wearieth him,  
For he cannot even find his way to the city.

16 Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child,  
And thy princes feast in the morning !

17 Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is noble,  
And thy princes eat at due hours,  
For strength and not for revelry !

18 Through slothful hands the roof falleth in,  
And through lazy hands the house lets in the rain.

19 They turn bread, and wine, which cheereth life,  
into revelry ;  
And money has to pay for all.

VER. 15. *He cannot even find his way to the city*; a proverbial saying. It denotes the fool who has not wit enough even to keep a high road, to walk in the beaten path which leads to a capital city. The thought was evidently familiar to Jewish literature; for Isaiah (xxxv. 8) speaks of the way of holiness as a highway in which "waysfaring men, *though fools*, shall not err."

VERS. 18, 19. *And money pays for all*; i.e. the money of the people. The slothful prodigal rulers, under whose mal-administration the whole fabric of the State was fast falling into decay, extorted the means for their profligate revelry from their toil-worn

20 Nevertheless revile not the king even in thy thoughts,  
 Nor a prince even in thy bed-chamber,  
 Lest the bird of the air carry the report,  
 And the winged tribes tell the story.

1 Cast thy bread upon the waters,                          *But in a wise  
Use and a wise  
Enjoyment of  
the Present  
Life;*  
 For in time thou mayest find the good  
 of it ;

2 Give a portion to seven, and even to  
 eight,  
 For thou knowest not what calamity may come  
 upon the earth.

3 When the clouds are full of rain,  
 They empty it upon the earth ;  
 And when the tree falleth, toward south or north,  
 In the place where the tree falleth there will it lie.

4 Whoso watcheth the wind shall not sow,  
 And he who observeth the clouds shall not reap ;

5 As thou knowest the course of the wind  
 As little as that of the embryo in the womb of the  
 pregnant,  
 So thou knowest not the work of God,

Ch. xi., vv. 1-8.

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and oppressed subjects. It is significant of the caution induced by the extreme tyranny of the time, that the whole description of its political condition is conveyed in proverbs more enigmatical than usual, and capable of being interpreted in more senses than one.

Who worketh all things.

6 Sow, then, thy seed in the morning,  
 And slack not thy hand in the evening,  
 Since thou knowest not which shall prosper, this or  
 that,  
 Or whether both shall prove good :  
 7 And the light shall be sweet to thee,  
 And it shall be pleasant to thine eyes to behold the  
 sun :  
 8 For even if a man should live many years,  
 He ought to rejoice in them all,  
 And to remember that there will be many dark days ;  
 Yea, that all that cometh is vanity.

9 Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth,  
 And let thy heart cheer thee in the  
 days of thy youth ;  
 And pursue the ways of thine heart,  
 And that which thine eyes desire ;  
 And know that for all these  
 God will bring thee into judgment :  
 10 Banish, therefore, care from thy mind,  
 And put away sadness from thy flesh,  
 For youth and manhood are vanity.  
 And remember thy Creator in the days of thy  
 youth,

*Combined with  
 a steadfast  
 Faith in the  
 Life to come.*

Ch. xi., v. 9-  
 Ch. xii., v. 7.

xii.

Before the evil days come,

And the years approach of which thou shalt say,  
 "I have no pleasure in them ;"

2 Before the sun groweth dark,  
 And the light, and the moon, and the stars ;  
 And the clouds return after the rain :

3 When the keepers of the house shall quake,  
 And the men of power crouch down ;  
 When the grinding-maids shall stop because so  
 few are left,  
 And the women who look out of the lattices shall  
 be shrouded in darkness,  
 And the door shall be closed on the street :

4 When the sound of the mills shall cease,  
 And the swallow fly shrieking to and fro,  
 And all the song-birds drop silently into their nests.

5 There shall be terror at that which cometh from the  
 height,

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VER. 3. *The women who look out of the lattices*; i.e. the luxurious ladies of the harem looking through their windows to see what is going on outside. Compare Judges v. 28; 2 Samuel vi. 16; and 2 Kings ix. 30.

VER. 4. *The swallow*, etc. Literally, "*the bird shall arise for a noise*," i.e. the bird which flies abroad and makes a noise at the approach of a tempest: viz. the swallow. *All the song-birds*. Literally, "*all the daughters of song*," a Hebraism for birds.

VER. 5. *From the height*, i.e. from heaven. *The locust be loathed*. It is commonly assumed that the locust was only eaten by the poor; but Aristotle (*Hist. Anim.*, v. 30) names them as a

And fear shall beset the highway :  
The almond also shall be rejected,  
And the locust be loathed,  
And the caper-berry provoke no appetite ;  
Because man goeth to his long home,  
And the mourners pace up and down the street ;—  
6 Before the silver cord snappeth asunder,  
And the golden bowl escapeth ;  
Before the pitcher be shattered at the fountain,  
And the wheel is broken at the well ;  
7 And the body is cast into the earth from which it  
came,  
And the spirit returneth to God who gave it.

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delicacy, and Ginsburg affirms that they are still considered so by the cultivated and well-to-do Arabs. *His long home.* Literally, "his *eternal* home," the domus æterna of the early Christian tombs.

## THE EPILOGUE.

*IN WHICH THE PROBLEM OF THE BOOK IS  
CONCLUSIVELY SOLVED.*

CHAP. XII., vv. 8-14.

- 8 Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher,  
All is vanity !
- 9 And not only was the Preacher a wise man ;  
He also taught the people wisdom,  
And compared, collected, and arranged many  
proverbs.
- 10 The Preacher sought out words of comfort,  
And wrote down in uprightness words of truth.
- 11 The words of the Wise are like goads,  
And those of the Masters of the Assemblies like  
spikes driven home,  
Given out by the same Shepherd.
- 12 And of what is more than these, my son,  
beware ;  
For of making of many books there is no end,  
And much study is a weariness to the flesh.

13 The conclusion of the matter is this ;—  
That God taketh cognisance of all things :  
Fear Him, therefore, and keep his commandments,  
For this it behoveth every man to do,

14 Since God will bring every deed to the judgment  
Appointed for every secret thing,  
Whether it be good or whether it be bad.

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VER. 13. *God taketh cognisance of all things.* Literally, "Everything is noted" or "heard," i.e. by God the Judge. Ginsburg conjectures, not without reason, as I think, that the Sacred Name was omitted from this clause of the verse simply because the Author wished to reserve it for the more emphatic clause which follows it. Many good scholars, however, read the clause as meaning simply, "The conclusion of the matter, *when all has been heard*," i.e. which even the Sages can adduce.

# EXPOSITION.



## THE PROLOGUE.

*IN WHICH THE PROBLEM OF THE BOOK IS  
INDIRECTLY STATED.*

CHAP. I., vv. 1-11.

THE search for the *summum bonum*, the quest of the Chief Good, is the theme of the Book Ecclesiastes. Naturally we look to find this theme, this problem, this "riddle of the painful earth," distinctly stated in the opening verses of the Book. It is stated, but not distinctly. For the Book is an autobiographical poem, the journal of the Preacher's inward life set forth in a dramatic form. "A man of ripe wisdom and mature experience, he takes us into his confidence. He unclasps the secret volume, and invites us to read it with him. He lays before us what he has been, what he has thought and done, what he has seen and felt and suffered; and then he asks us to listen to the judgment which he has deliberately formed on a review of the whole."<sup>1</sup> But that he may the more unreservedly lay bare his heart to us, he uses the

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Perowne, in *The Expositor*, First Series, vol. ix.

Poet's privilege, and presents himself to us under a mask and wrapped in Solomon's ample mantle. And a dramatic poet conveys his conceptions of human character and circumstance and action, not by direct picturesque descriptions, but, placing men before us "in their habit as they lived," he makes them speak to us, and leaves us to infer their character and condition from their words.

In accordance with the rules of his art, the dramatic Preacher brings himself on the stage of his poem, permits us to hear his most penetrating and characteristic utterances, confesses his own most secret and inward experiences, and thus enables us to conceive and to judge him. He is true to his artistic canons from the outset. His prologue, unlike that of the Book of Job, is cast in the dramatic form. Instead of giving us a clear statement of the moral problem he is about to discuss, he opens with the characteristic utterances of the man who, wearied with many futile endeavours, gathers up his remaining strength to recount the experiments he has tried and the conclusion he has reached. Like Browning, one of the most dramatic of modern poets, he plunges abruptly into his theme, and speaks to us from the first through "feigned lips." Just as in reading the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, or the *Epistle of Karshish, the Arab Physician*, or a score other of Browning's poems, we have first to

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glance through it in order to collect the scattered hints which indicate the speaker and the time, and then laboriously to think ourselves back, by their help, into the time and conditions of the speaker, so also with this Hebrew poem. It opens abruptly with "words of the Preacher," who is at once the author and the hero of the drama. "Who is he," we ask, "and what?" "When did he live, and what place did he fill?" And at present we can only reply, He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness of Oriental antiquity, and saying, "Vanity of vanities! *all* is vanity!"<sup>1</sup> For what intent, then, does his voice break the long silence? Of what ethical mood is this pathetic note the expression? What prompts his despairing cry?

It is the old contrast—old as literature, old as man—between the ordered steadfastness of nature and the disorder and brevity of human life. The Preacher gazes on the universe above and around him. The ancient earth is firm and strong beneath his feet. The sun runs his race with joy, sinks exhausted into its ocean bed, but rises on the morrow, like a giant refreshed with old wine, to renew its course. The variable and inconstant wind, which bloweth where it listeth, blows from the same quarters, runs through the very circuit which was its haunt in the time of the

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Horace (*Od.* iv. 7, 9): *Pulvis et umbra sumus.*

world's grey fathers. The streams which ebb and flow, which go and come, run along time-worn beds and are fed from their ancient source. But man, "to one point constant never," shifts from change to change. As compared with the calm uniformity of nature, his life is a mere phantasy, passing for ever through a tedious and limited range of forms, each of which is as unsubstantial as the fabric of a vision, many of which are as base and sordid as they are unreal, and all of which, for ever in a flux, elude the grasp of those who pursue them, or disappoint those who hold them in their hands. "All is vanity; for man has no profit," no adequate and enduring reward, "for all his labour;" literally, "no balance, no surplus, on the balance-sheet of life:" less happy, because less stable, than the earth on which he dwells, he comes and goes, while the earth goes on for ever (vv. 2-4).

This painful contrast between the ordered stability of nature and the changeful and profitless disorder of human life is emphasized by a detailed reference to the large natural forces which rule the world, and which abide unchanged, although to us they seem the very types of change. The figure of ver. 5 is, of course, that of the racer. The sun rises every morning to run its course, pursues it through the day, "pants," as one well-nigh breathless, toward its goal,

and sinks at night into its subterraneous bed in the sea ; but, though exhausted and breathless at night, it rises on the morrow refreshed, and eager, like a strong, swift man, to renew its daily race. In ver. 6 the wind is represented as having a regular law and circuit, though it now blows South, and now veers round to the North. The East and West are not mentioned, probably because they are tacitly referred to in the rising and setting sun of the previous verse : all the four quarters are included between the two. In ver. 7 the streams are described as returning on their sources ; but there is no allusion here, as we might suppose, to the tides,—and indeed tidal rivers are comparatively rare,—or to the rain which brings back the water evaporated from the surface of the streams and of the sea. The reference is, rather, to an ancient conception of the physical order of nature held by the Hebrew as by other races, according to which the ocean, fed by the streams, sent back a constant supply through subterraneous passages and channels, in which the salt was filtered out of it ; through these they supposed the rivers to return to the place whence they came. The ruling sentiment of these verses is that, while all the natural elements and forces, even the most variable and inconstant, renew their strength and return upon their course, for frail man there is no return ; permanence and

uniformity characterise *them*, while transitoriness and instability mark *him* for their own. They seem to vanish and disappear ; the sun sinks, the winds lull, the streams run dry ; but they all come back again : for him there is no coming back ; once gone, he is gone for ever.

But it is vain to talk of these or other instances of the weary yet restless activity of the universe ; "man cannot utter it." For, besides these elemental illustrations, the world is crowded with illustrations of incessant change, which yet move within narrow bounds and do nothing to relieve its sameness. So numerous are they, so innumerable, that the curious eye and inquisitive ear of man would be worn out before they had completed the tale of them : and if eye and ear could never be satisfied with hearing and seeing, how much less the slower tongue with speaking (ver. 8) ? All through the universe what hath been 'still is and will be ; what was done is done still and always will be done ; the sun still running the same race, the winds still blowing from the same points, the streams still flowing between the same banks and returning by the same channels. If any man suppose that he has discovered new phenomena, any natural fact which has not been repeating itself from the beginning, it is only because he is ignorant of that which has been of old

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(vv. 9, 10).<sup>1</sup> Yet, while in nature all things return on their course and abide for ever, man's day is soon spent, his force soon exhausted. *He* does not return; nay, he is not so much as remembered by those who come after him. Just as we have forgotten those who were before us, so those who live after us will forget us (ver. 11). The burden of all this unintelligible world lies heavily on the Preacher's soul. He is weary of the world's "everlasting sameness." The miseries and confusions of the human lot baffle and oppress his thoughts. Above all, the contrast between Nature and Man, between its massive and stately permanence and the frailty and brevity of our existence, breeds in him the despairing mood of which we have the keynote in his cry, "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!"

Yet this is not the only, not the inevitable, mood of the mind as it ponders that great contrast. *We* have learned to look upon it with other, perhaps with wider, eyes. We say, How grand, how soothing, how hopeful is the spectacle of nature's uniformity! How it lifts us above the fluctuations of inward thought, and gladdens us with a sense of stability and repose! As we see the ancient inviolable laws working out into

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<sup>1</sup> So Marcus Aurelius (*Medit.*, xi. 1): "They that come after us will see nothing new; and they who went before saw nothing more than we have seen."

the same gracious and beautiful results day after day and year by year, and reflect that "what has been will be," we are redeemed from our bondage to vanity and corruption ; we look up with composed and reverent trust to Him who is our God and Father, and onward to the stable and glorious immortality we are to spend with Him ; we argue with Habakkuk (chap. i. ver. 12), "Art not *Thou* from everlasting, O Lord our God, our Holy One ? *We* shall not die," but live.

But if we did not know the Ruler of the universe to be our God and Father ; if our thoughts had still to "jump the life to come" or to leap at it with a mere guess ; if we had to cross the gulf of death on no more solid bridge than a Peradventure ; if, in short, our life were infinitely more troubled and uncertain than it is, and the true good of life and its bright sustaining hope were still to seek, how would it be with us then ? Then, like the Preacher, we might feel the steadfastness and uniformity of nature as an affront to our vanity and weakness. In place of drinking in hope and composure from the fair visage and unbroken order of the universe, we might deem its face to be darkened with a frown or its eye to be glancing on us with bitter irony. Instead of finding in its inevitable order and permanence a hopeful prophecy of *our* recovery into an unbroken order and an enduring peace, we might passionately demand why, on an abiding earth and under an un-

changing heaven, we should die and be forgotten ; why, more inconstant than the variable wind, more evanescent than the parching stream, one generation should go never to return, and another generation come to enjoy the gains of those who were before them, and to blot their memory from the earth.

This, indeed, *has* been the impassioned protest and outcry of every age. Literature is full of it. The contrast between the tranquil unchanging sky, with its myriads of pure lustrous stars, which are always there and always in a happy concert, and the frailty of man rushing blindly through his brief and perturbed course has lent its ground-tones to the poetry of every race. We meet it everywhere. It is the oldest of old songs. In all the many languages of the divided earth we hear how the generations of men pass swifty and stormfully across its bosom, "searching the serene heavens with the inquest of their beseeching looks," but winning no response ; asking always, and always in vain, " Why are we thus ? why are we thus ? frail as the moth, and of few days like the flower ? " It is this contrast between the serenity and the stability of nature and the frailty and turbulence of man which afflicts Coheleth and drives him to conclusions of despair. Here is man, "so noble in reason, so infinite in faculty, in apprehension so like a god," longing with an ardent intensity for the peace which results from the equipoise

and happy occupation of his various powers ; and yet his whole life is wasted in labours and tumults, in perplexity and strife ; he goes to his grave with his cravings unsatisfied, his powers untrained, unharmonised, knowing no rest till he lies in the narrow bed from which is no uprising ! What wonder if to such an one as he “this goodly frame, the earth, seems but a sterile promontory” stretching out a little space into the dark, infinite void ; “this most excellent canopy, the air . . . this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire,” nothing but “a foul, pestilential congregation of vapours” ? What wonder if, for him, the very beauty of nature should turn into a repulsive hideousness, and its steadfast, unchanging order be held a satire on the disorder and vanity of his life ?

Solomon, moreover,—and Solomon in his premature old age, sated and weary, is the mask under which the Preacher conceals his natural face,—had had a large experience of life, had tried its ambitions, its lusts, its pursuits and pleasures ; he had tested every promise of good which it held forth, and found them all illusory ; he had drunk of every stream, and found no pure living water with which he could slake his thirst. And men such as he, sated but not satisfied, jaded with voluptuous delights and without the peace of faith, commonly look out on the world with haggard eyes. They feed their

despair on the natural order and purity which they feel to be a rebuke to the impurity of their own restless and perturbed hearts. Many of us have, no doubt, stood on Richmond Hill, and looked with softening eyes on the rich pastures dotted with cattle, and broken with clumps of trees through which shoot up village spires, while the full, placid Thames winds in many a curve through pasture and wood. It is not a grand or romantic scene ; but on a quiet evening, in the long level rays of the setting sun, it is a scene to inspire content and thankful, peaceful thoughts. Wilberforce tells us that he once stood in the balcony of a villa looking down on this scene. Beside him stood the owner of the villa, a duke notorious for his profligacy in a profligate age ; and as they looked across the stream, the duke cried out, “O that river ! there it runs, on and on, and I so weary of it !” And *there* you have the very mood of this Prologue ; the mood for which the fair, smiling heavens and the gracious, bountiful earth carry no benediction of peace, because they are reflected from a heart all tossed into crossing and impure waves.

All things depend on the heart we bring to them. This very contrast between Nature and Man has no despair in it, breeds no dispeace or anger in the heart at leisure from itself and at peace with God. Tennyson, for instance, makes a merry musical brook sing to us on this very theme.

"I come from haunts of coot and hern,  
I make a sudden sally  
And sparkle out among the fern,  
To bicker down a valley.

"I chatter over stony ways  
In little sharps and trebles,  
I bubble into eddying bays,  
I babble on the pebbles.

"I chatter, chatter as I flow  
To join the brimming river ;  
*For men may come and men may go,*  
*But I go on for ever.*

"I steal by lawns and grassy plots,  
I slide by hazel covers ;  
I move the sweet forget-me-nots  
That grow for happy lovers.

"I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance  
Among my skimming swallows ;  
I make the netted sunbeams dance  
Against my sanded shallows.

"I murmur under moon and stars  
In brambly wildernesses ;  
I linger by my shingly bars ;  
I loiter round my cresses.

"And out again I curve and flow  
To join the brimming river ;  
*For men may come and men may go,*  
*But I go on for ever."*

It is the very plaint of the Preacher set to sweet music.  
He murmurs, "One generation passeth, and another

generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever ; " while the refrain of the Brook is,—

" For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on for ever."

Yet we do not feel that the Song of the Brook should feed any mood of grief and despair. The tune that it sings to the sleeping woods all night is "a cheerful tune." By some subtle process we are made to share its bright, tender hilarity, though we too are of the men that come and go. Into what a fume would the Hebrew Preacher have been thrown had any little "babbling brook" dared to sing this saucy song *to him*. He would have felt it as an insult, and have assumed that the merry, innocent creature was "crowing" over the swiftly passing generations of men. But, for the Christian Poet, the Brook sings a song whose blithe dulcet strain attunes the heart to the quiet harmonies of peace and good-will.

Again I say all depends on the heart we turn to nature. It was because his heart was heavy with the memory of many sins and many failures, because too the lofty Christian hopes were beyond his reach, that this "son of David" grew mournful and bitter in her presence.

This, then, is the mood in which the Preacher commences his quest of the Chief Good. He is driven to

it by the need of finding that in which he can rest. As a rule, it is only on the most stringent compulsions that we any of us undertake this high Quest. Of their profound need of a Chief Good most men are but seldom and faintly conscious ; but to the favoured few, who are to lead and mould the public thought, it comes with a force they cannot resist. It was thus with Coheleth. He could not endure to think that those who have "all things put under their feet" should lie at the mercy of accidents from which their realm is exempt ; that *they* should be the mere fools of change, while *that* abides unchanged for ever. And, therefore, he set out to discover the conditions on which they might become partakers of the order and stability and peace of nature ; the conditions on which, raised above all the tides and storms of change, they might sit calm and serene even though the heavens should be folded as a scroll and the earth be shaken from its foundations. This, and only this, will he recognise as the Chief Good, the Good appropriate to the nature of man, because capable of satisfying all his cravings and supplying all his wants.

## FIRST SECTION.

### *THE QUEST OF THE CHIEF GOOD IN WISDOM AND IN PLEASURE.*

CHAP. I., VER. 12, TO CHAP. II., VER. 26.

OPPRESSED by his profound sense of the vanity of the life which man lives amid the play of permanent natural forces, Coheleth sets out on the search for that true and supreme Good which it will be well for the sons of men to pursue through their brief day; the good which will sustain them under all their toils, and be "a portion" so large and enduring as to satisfy even their vast desires.

I. And, as was natural in so wise a man, he turns first to *Wisdom*. He gives himself diligently to inquire into all the actions and toils of men. He will ascertain whether a larger acquaintance with their conditions, a deeper insight into the facts, a more just and complete estimate of their lot, will remove the depression which weighs upon his heart. He devotes himself earnestly to this Quest, and acquires a "greater wisdom than all who were before him."

*The Quest in  
Wisdom.*

Ch.i, vv. 12-18.

This wisdom, however, is not a scientific knowledge of facts or of social and political laws, nor is it the result of philosophical speculations on "the first good or the first fair," or on the nature and constitution of man. It is the wisdom that is born of wide and varied experience, not of abstract study. He acquaints himself with the facts of human life, with the circumstances, thoughts, feelings, hopes, and aims of all sorts and conditions of men. He is fain to know "all that men do under the sun," "all that is done under heaven." Like the Arabian Caliph, "the good Haroun Alraschid," we may suppose that Coheleth goes forth in disguise to visit all quarters of the city; to talk with barbers, druggists, calenders, porters, with merchants and mariners, husbandmen and tradesmen, mechanics and artizans; to try conclusions with travellers and with the blunt wits of home-keeping men. He will look with his own eyes and learn for himself what their lives are like, how they conceive of the human lot, and what, if any, are the mysteries which sadden and perplex them. He will ascertain whether *they* have any key that will unlock his perplexities, any wisdom that will solve his problems or help him to bear his burden with a more cheerful heart. Because his depression was fed by every fresh contemplation of the order of the universe, he turns from nature to "the proper study of mankind."

But this also he finds a heavy and disappointing task. After a wide and dispassionate scrutiny, when he has "seen *much* wisdom and knowledge," he concludes that man has no fair reward "for all his labour that he laboureth under the sun," that no wisdom avails to set straight that which is crooked in human affairs, or to supply that which is lacking in them. The sense of vanity bred by his contemplation of the stedfast round of nature only grows more profound and more painful as he reflects on the numberless and manifold disorders which afflict humanity. And hence, before he ventures on a new experiment, he makes a pathetic appeal to the heart which he had so earnestly applied to the search, and in which he had stored up so large and various a knowledge, and confesses that "even this is vexation of spirit," that "in much wisdom is much sadness," and that "to multiply knowledge is to multiply sorrow."

And whether we consider the nature of the case or the conditions of the time in which this Book was written, we shall not be surprised at the mournful conclusion to which he comes. For the time was full of cruel oppressions and wrongs. Life was insecure. To acquire property was to court extortion. The Hebrews, and even the conquering race which ruled them, were slaves to the caprice of satraps and magistrates whose days were wasted in revelry and in

the unbridled indulgence of their lusts. And to go among the various conditions of men groaning under a despotism like that of the Turk, whose foot strikes with barrenness every spot on which it treads ; to see all the fair rewards of honest toil withheld, the noble degraded and the foolish exalted, the righteous trodden down by the feet of the wicked ; all this was not likely to quicken cheerful thoughts in a wise man's heart : instead of solving, it could but complicate and darken the problems over which he was already brooding in despair.

And, apart from the special wrongs and oppressions of the time, it is inevitable that the thoughtful student of men and manners should become a sadder as he becomes a wiser man. To multiply knowledge, at least of this kind, *is* to multiply sorrow. We need not be cynics and leave our tub only to reflect on the dishonesty of our neighbours, we need only go through the world with open and observant eyes in order to learn that "in much wisdom is much sadness." Recall the wisest of modern times, those who have had the most intimate acquaintance with man and men, Goethe and Carlyle for example ; are they not all touched with a profound sadness ?<sup>1</sup> Do they not look with some

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<sup>1</sup> Père Lacordaire has a fine passage on this theme. "Weak and little minds find here below a nourishment which suffices for their intellect and satisfies their love. They do not discover

scorn on the common life of the mass of men, with its base passions and pleasures, struggles and rewards? and, in proportion as they have the spirit of Christ, is not their very scorn kindly, springing from a pity which lies deeper than itself? Did not even the Master Himself, though full of ruth and grace, share their feeling as He saw publicans growing rich by extortion, hypocrites mounting to Moses' chair, subtle, cruel foxes couched on thrones, scribes hiding the key of knowledge, and the blind multitude following their blind leaders into the ditch?

Nay, if we look out on the world of to-day, can we say that even the majority of men are wise and pure?

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the emptiness of visible things because they are incapable of sounding them to the bottom. But a soul which God has drawn nearer to the Infinite very soon feels the narrow limits within which it is pent; it experiences moments of inexpressible sadness, the cause of which for a long time remains a mystery; it even seems as though some strange concurrence of events must have chanced in order thus to disturb its life; and all the while the trouble comes from a higher source. In reading the lives of the Saints, we find that nearly all of them have felt that sweet melancholy of which the ancients said *that there was no genius without it*. In fact, melancholy is inseparable from every mind that looks below the surface and every heart that feels profoundly. Not that we should take complacency in it, for it is a malady that enervates when we do not shake it off; and it has but two remedies—*Death or God*.” Elsewhere, still quite in the spirit of the Preacher, he says: “Every day I feel more and more that all is vanity. *I cannot leave my heart in this heap of mud.*”

Is it always the swift who win the race, and the strong who carry off the honours of the battle ? Do none of our "intelligent lack bread," nor any of the learned favour ? Are there no fools lifted to high places to show with how little wisdom the world is governed, and no brave and noble breasts dinted by the blows of hostile circumstances or wounded by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" ? Are all our workmen diligent, and all our masters fair ? Are no false measures and balances known in our markets, and no frauds on our exchanges ? Are none of our homes dungeons, with fathers and husbands for jailors ? Do we never hear, as we stand without, the sound of cruel blows and the shrieks of tortured captives ? Are there no hypocrites in our Churches "that with devotion's visage sugar o'er" a corrupt heart ? And do the best men always gain the highest place and honour ? Are there none in our midst who have to bear—

"The whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes" ?

Alas, if we think to find the true Good in a wide and varied knowledge of the conditions of men, their hopes and fears, their struggles and successes, their loves and hates, their rights and wrongs, their pleasures and

their pains, we shall but share the defeat of the Preacher, and repeat his bitter cry, "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" For, as he himself implies at the very outset (ver. 13), "this sore task," this eternal quest of a wisdom which will solve the problems and remove the inequalities of human life, is God's *gift* to the children of men,—this search for a solution they never reach. Age after age, unwarmed by the failure of those who took this road before them, they renew the hopeless quest.

2. But if we cannot reach the object of our Quest in Wisdom, we may, perchance, find it in Pleasure. This experiment also the Preacher has tried, tried on the largest scale and under the most auspicious conditions. *The Quest in Pleasure.*  
Ch. ii., vv. 1-11. Wisdom failing to satisfy the large desires of his soul, or even to lift it from its depression, he turns to mirth.<sup>1</sup> Once more, as he forthwith announces, he is disappointed in the result. He pronounces mirth a brief madness ; in itself, like wisdom, a good, it is not the Chief Good ; to make it supreme is to rob it of its natural charm.

Not content with this general verdict, however, he

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<sup>1</sup> So Goethe's *Faust*, after having failed to solve the insoluble problems of life by study and research, "plunges deep in pleasure," that he "may thus still the burning thirst of passionate desire."

recounts the details of his experiment, that he may deter us from repeating it. Speaking in the person of Solomon and utilising the facts of *his* experience, Coheleth claims to have started in the quest with the greatest advantages ; for “what can he do who cometh after the king whom they made king long ago ?” He surrounded himself with all the luxuries of an Oriental prince, not out of any vulgar love of show and ostentation, nor out of any strong sensual addictions, but that he might discover wherein the secret and fascination of pleasure lay, and what it could do for a man who pursued it wisely. He built himself new, costly palaces, as the Sultan of Turkey used to do almost every year. He laid out parades, planted them with vines and fruit-trees of every sort, and large shady groves to screen off and attemper the heat of the sun.<sup>1</sup> He dug great tanks and reservoirs of water, and cut channels which carried the cool vital stream through

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<sup>1</sup> “One such pleasaunce as this there was at Etam, Solomon’s Belvedere, as Josephus informs us (*Antiq.*, VIII. 7, 3). Thither it was the custom of the king, he says, to resort when he made his morning excursions from the city, clad in a white garment, and driving his chariot, surrounded by his body-guard of young men in the flower of their age, clad in Tyrian purple, and with gold dust strewed upon their hair, so that their whole head sparkled when the sun shone upon it, and mounted upon horses from the royal stables, famed for their beauty and fleetness.”—Dr. Perowne, *The Expositor*, First Series, vol. x.

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the gardens and to the roots of the trees. He bought men and maids, and surrounded himself with the retinue of servants and slaves requisite to keep his palaces and paradises in order, to serve his sumptuous tables, to swell his pomp: *i.e.* he gathered together such a train of ministers, attendants, domestics, indoor and outdoor slaves, as is still thought necessary to the dignity of an Oriental "lord." His herds of flocks, a main source of Oriental wealth, were of finer strain and larger in number than had been known before. He amassed enormous treasures of silver and gold, the common Oriental hoard. He collected the peculiar treasures "of kings and of the kingdoms;" whatever special commodity was yielded by any foreign land was caught up for his use by his officers or presented to him by his allies.<sup>1</sup> He hired famous musicians and singers, and gave himself to those delights of harmony which have had a peculiar charm for the Hebrews of all ages. He crowded his harem with the beauties both of his own and of foreign lands. He withheld nothing from them that his eyes desired, and kept not

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<sup>1</sup> In speaking of the Persian revenue, Rawlinson says that besides a definite money payment, "a payment, the nature and amount of which were also fixed, had to be made in kind, each province being required to furnish that commodity, or those commodities, for which it was most celebrated,"—as, for example, grain, sheep, cattle, mules, fine breeds of horses, beautiful slaves. *The Five Great Monarchies*, vol. iv., chap. vii., p. 421.

his heart from any pleasure. He set himself seriously and intelligently to make happiness his portion ; and, while cherishing or cheering his body with pleasures, he did not rush into them with the blind eagerness “whose violent property foredoes itself” and defeats its own ends. His “mind guided him wisely” amid his delights ; his “wisdom helped him” to select, and combine, and vary them, to enhance and prolong their sweetness by a certain art and temperance in the enjoyment of them.

“He built his soul a lordly pleasure-house,  
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell ;  
He said, ‘Oh Soul, make merry and carouse,  
Dear Soul, for all is well !’”

Alas, all was *not* well, though he took much pains to make and think it well. Even his choice delights soon palled upon his taste, and brought on conclusions of disgust. Even in his lordly pleasure-house he was haunted by the grim, menacing spectres which troubled him before it was built. In the harem, in the paradise he had planted, under the groves, beside the fountains, at the sumptuous banquet,—a bursting bubble, a falling leaf, an empty wine cup, a passing blush, sufficed to bring back the thought of the brevity and the emptiness of life. When he had run the full career of pleasure, and turned to contemplate his delights and the labour they had cost him, he found that these also were vanity

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and vexation of spirit, that there was no "profit" in them, that they could not satisfy the deep, incessant craving of the soul for a true and lasting Good.

Is not his sad verdict as true as it is sad ? We have not his wealth of resources. Nevertheless there may have been a time when our hearts were as intent on pleasure as was his. We may have pursued whatever sensuous, intellectual, or æsthetic excitements were open to us with a growing eagerness till we have lived in a whirl of craving and stimulating desire and indulgence, in which the claims of duty have been neglected and the rebukes of conscience unheeded. And if we *have* passed through this experience, if we have been carried for a time into this giddy round, have we not come out of it jaded, exhausted, despising ourselves for our folly, disgusted with what once seemed the very top and crown of delight ? Do we not mourn, our after life through, over energies wasted and opportunities lost ? Are we not sadder, if wiser, men for our brief frenzy ? As we return to the sober duties and simple joys of life, do not *we* say to Mirth, "Thou art mad !" and to Pleasure, "What canst thou do for us ?" Yes, our verdict is that of the Preacher, "Lo, this too is vanity !" *Non enim hilaritate, nec lascivia, nec visu, aut joco, comite levitatis, sed saepe etiam tristes firmitate, et constantia sunt beati.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Fin.*, Lib. II., Cap. 20.

It is characteristic of the philosophic temper of our Author, I think, that, after pronouncing Wisdom and Mirth vanities in which the true Good is not to be found, he does not at once proceed to try a new experiment, but Ch. ii., vv. 12-23. pauses to compare these two "vanities," and to reason out his preference of one over the other. *His vanity is wisdom.* For it is only in one respect that he puts mirth and wisdom on an equality, viz. that they neither of them are, or lead up to, the supreme Good. In all other respects he affirms wisdom to be as much better than pleasure as light is better than darkness, as much better as it is to have eyes that see the light than to be blind and walk in a constant gloom (vv. 12-14). It is because wisdom is a light and enables men to see that he accords it his preference. It is by the light of wisdom that he has learned the vanity of mirth, nay, the insufficiency of wisdom itself. But for that light he might still be pursuing pleasures which could not satisfy, or laboriously acquiring a knowledge which would only deepen his sadness. Wisdom had opened his eyes to see that he must seek the Good which gives rest and peace in other regions. He no longer goes on his Quest in utter blindness, with all the world before him where to choose, but with no indication of the course he should, or should not, take. He has already learned that two large provinces of

*Wisdom and  
Mirth com-  
pared.*

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human life will not yield him what he seeks, that he must expend no more of his brief day and failing energies on these.

Therefore wisdom is better than mirth. Nevertheless it is not best, nor can it remove the dejections of a thoughtful heart. Somewhere there is, 'there must be, that which is better still. For wisdom cannot explain to him why the same fate should befall both the sage and the fool (ver. 15), nor can it abate the anger that burns within him against an injustice so obvious and flagrant. Wisdom cannot even explain why, even if the sage must die no less than the fool, both must be forgotten wellnigh as soon as they are gone (vv. 16, 17); nor can it soften the hatred of life and its labours which this lesser yet patent injustice has kindled in his heart. Nay, wisdom, for all so brightly as it shines, throws no light on an injustice which, if of lower degree, frets and perplexes his mind, —why a man who has laboured prudently and dexterously and has acquired great gains should, when he dies, leave all to one who has not laboured therein, without even the poor consolation of knowing whether he will be a wise man or an idiot (vv. 19-21). In short, the whole skein of life is in a dismal tangle which wisdom itself, dearly as he loves it, cannot unravel; and the tangle is that man has no fair "profit" from his labours, "since his task grieveth and vexeth him

all his days, and even at night his heart hath no rest ; " and when he dies he loses all his gains, such as they are, for ever, and cannot so much as be sure that his heir will be any the better for them. " This also is vanity " (vv. 22, 23).

And yet, good things are surely good, and there is a wise and gracious enjoyment of earthly delights. It is right that a man should eat and drink, and take a natural pleasure in his toils and gains. Who, indeed, has a stronger claim than the labourer himself to eat and enjoy the fruit of his labours ? Still, even this natural enjoyment is the gift of God ; apart from his blessing the heaviest toils will produce but a scanty harvest, and the faculty of enjoying that harvest may be lacking. It is lacking to the sinner ; his task is to heap up gains which the good will inherit. But he that is good before God will have the gains of the sinner added to his own, with wisdom to enjoy both.<sup>1</sup> This, whatever appearances may sometimes suggest, is the law of God's giving : that the good shall have

<sup>1</sup> This affirmation, so surprising at first sight, is also made by Job (chap. xxvii., vv. 15, 16), " This is the doom of the wicked man from God. . . . Though he heap up silver like dust, and gather robes as mire, that which he hath gathered shall the righteous wear, and the innocent shall divide his silver."

abundance, while the bad lack ; that more shall be given to him who has wisdom to use what he has aright, while from him who is destitute of this wisdom, even that which he hath shall be taken away. Nevertheless even this wise use and enjoyment of temporal good does not and cannot satisfy the craving heart of man ; even this, when it is made the ruling aim and chief good of life, is vexation of spirit.

Thus the First Act of the Drama closes with a negative. The moral problem is as far from being solved as at the outset. All we have learned is that one or two avenues along which we urge the Quest will not lead us to the end we seek. As yet the Preacher has only the *ad interim* conclusion to offer us, that both Wisdom and Mirth are good, though neither, nor both combined, is the supreme Good ; that we are therefore to acquire wisdom and knowledge, and to blend pleasure with our toils ; that we are to believe pleasure and wisdom to be the gifts of God, to believe also that they are bestowed, not in caprice, but according to a law which deals out good to the good and evil to the evil. We shall have other opportunities of weighing and appraising his counsel—it is often repeated—and of seeing how it works into and forms part of Coheleth's final solution of the painful riddle of the earth, the baffling mystery of life.

## SECOND SECTION.

### *THE QUEST OF THE CHIEF GOOD IN DEVOTION TO THE AFFAIRS OF BUSINESS.*

CHAP. III., VER. 1, TO CHAP. V., VER. 20.

I. **I**F the true Good is not to be found in the School where Wisdom utters her voice, nor in the Garden in which Pleasure spreads her lures: may it not be found in the Market, in devotion to Business and Public Affairs? The Preacher will try this experiment also. He gives himself to study and consider it. But at the very outset he discovers that he is in the iron grip of immutable Divine ordinances, by which "seasons" are appointed for every undertaking under heaven (ver. 1), ordinances which derange man's best-laid schemes, and "shape his ends, rough-hew them how he will," that no one can do anything to purpose "apart from God," except by conforming to the ordinances, or laws, in which He has expressed His will (comp. chap. ii., vv. 24-26).

The time of birth, for instance, and the time of death, are ordained by a Power over which men have no control; they begin to be, and they cease to

be, at hours whose stroke they can neither hasten nor retard. The season for sowing and the season for reaping are fixed without any reference to their wish ; they must plant and gather in when the unchangeable laws of nature will permit (ver. 2). Even those violent deaths, and those narrow escapes from death, which seem most purely fortuitous, are predetermined ; as are also the accidents which befall our abodes (ver. 3). So, again, if only because determined by these accidents, are the feelings with which we regard them, our weeping and our laughter, our mourning and our rejoicing (ver. 4). If we only clear a plot of ground from stones in order that we may cultivate it, or that we may fence it in with a wall ; or if an enemy cast stones over our arable land to unfit it for uses of husbandry—a malignant act frequent in the East—and we have painfully to gather them out again : even this, which seems so purely within the scope of human free-will, is also within the scope of the Divine decrees—as are the very embraces we bestow on those dear to us, or withhold from them (ver. 5). The varying and unstable desires which prompt us to seek this object or that as earnestly as we afterwards carelessly cast it away, and the passions which impel us to rend our garments over our losses, and by-and-bye to sew up the rents not without some little wonder that we should ever have been so deeply

*The Quest ob-  
structed by  
Divine  
Ordinances ;*  
Ch. iii., vv. 1-15.

moved by that which now sits so lightly on us ; these passions and desires, which at one time strike us dumb with grief and so soon after make us volatile with joy, with all our fleeting and easily-moved hates and loves, strifes and reconciliations, move within the circle of law, although they wear so lawless a look, and are obsequious to the fixed canons of Heaven (vv. 6-8). They travel their cycles ; they return in their appointed order. The uniformity of nature is reproduced in the uniform recurrence of the chances and changes of human life ; for in this, as in that, God repeats Himself, recalling the past (ver. 15). The thing that *is* is that which hath been, and that which will be. Social laws are as constant and as inflexible as natural laws. The social generalisations of modern science—as given, for instance, in Buckle's *History*—are but a methodical elaboration of the conclusion at which the Preacher here arrives.

Of what use, then, was it for men to “kick against the goads,” to attempt to modify immutable ordinances ? “Whatever God hath ordained continueth for ever ; nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken from it ” (ver. 14). Nay, why should we care to alter or modify the social order ? Everything is beautiful and appropriate in its season, from birth to death, from war to peace (ver. 11). If we cannot find the satisfying Good in the events and affairs

of life, that is not because we could devise a happier order for them, but because "God hath put *eternity* into our hearts" as well as time, and did not intend that we should be satisfied till we attain an eternal good. If only we "understood" that, if only we recognised God's design for us "from beginning to end," and suffered eternity no less than time to have its due of us, we should not fret ourselves in vain endeavours to change the unchangeable, or to find an enduring good in that which is fugitive and perishable. We should rejoice and do ourselves good all our brief life (ver. 12); we should eat and drink and take pleasure in our labours (ver. 13); we should feel that this faculty for innocently enjoying simple pleasures and wholesome toils is "a gift of God:" we should conclude that God had ordained that regular cycle and order of events which so often forestalls the wish and endeavour of the moment, in order that we should fear Him in place of relying on ourselves (ver. 14), and trust our future to Him who so wisely and graciously recalls the past.

But not only are our endeavours to find the "good" of our labours thwarted by the gracious, inflexible laws of the just God; they are often baffled by the injustice of ungracious men. In the days of Coheleth, Iniquity sat in the seat of justice, wresting all rules of equity to

*And by Human  
Injustice and  
Perversity.*

Ch. iii., v. 16-

Ch. iv., v. 3.

its base private ends (ver. 16). Unjust judges and rapacious satraps put the fair rewards of labour and skill and integrity in jeopardy, insomuch that if a man by industry and thrift, by a wise observance of Divine laws and by taking occasions as they rose, had acquired affluence, he was too often, in the expressive Eastern phrase, but as a sponge which any petty despot might squeeze. The frightful oppressions of the time were a heavy burden to the Hebrew Preacher. He brooded over them, seeking for aids to faith and comfortable words wherewith to solace the oppressed. For a moment he thought he had lit on the true comfort, "Well, well," he said within himself, "*God* will judge the righteous and the wicked ; for there is a time for every thing and for every deed with Him" (ver. 17). Could he have rested in this thought, it would have been "a sovereign balm" to him, or indeed to any other Hebrew ; although to us, who have learned to desire the redemption rather than the punishment of the wicked, their redemption *through* their inevitable punishments, the true comfort would still have been wanting. But he could not rest in it, could not hold it fast, and confesses that he could not. He lays his heart bare before us. We are permitted to trace the fluctuating thoughts and emotions which swept across it. No sooner has he whispered to his heart that God, who is at leisure from Himself and has endless time at

his command, will visit the oppressors and avenge the oppressed, than his thoughts take a new turn, and he adds : " And yet God *may* have sifted the children of men only to shew them that they are no better than the beasts " (ver. 18) : *this* may be his aim in all the wrongs by which they are tried. Repugnant as the thought is, it nevertheless fascinates him for the instant, and he yields to its wasting and degrading magic. He not only fears, suspects, thinks that man is no better than a beast ; he is quite sure of it, and proceeds to argue it out. His argument is very sweeping, very sombre. "A mere chance is man, and the beast a mere chance." Both spring from a mere accident, no one can tell how, and have a blind hazard for a creator ; and " both are subject to the same chance," or mischance, throughout their lives, all the decisions of their intelligence and will being overruled by the decrees of an inscrutable fate. Both perish under the same power of death, suffer the same pangs of dissolution, are taken at unawares by the same invisible yet resistless force. The bodies of both spring from the same dust, and moulder back into dust. Nay, " both have the same spirit ; " and though vain man sometimes boasts that at death his spirit goeth upward, while that of the beast goeth downward, yet who can prove it ? For himself, and in his present mood, Coheleth doubts, and even denies it. He is absolutely convinced that in origin and life and

death, in body and spirit and final fate, man is as the beast is, and hath no advantage over the beast (vv. 19-21). And therefore he falls back on his old conclusion, though now with a sadder heart than ever, that man will do wisely, that, being so blind and having so dark a prospect, he cannot do more wisely than to take what pleasure and enjoy what good he can amid his labours. *If* he is a beast, *as* he is a beast, let him at least learn of the beasts that simple, tranquil enjoyment of the good of the passing moment, untroubled by any vexing presage of what is to come, in which it must be allowed that they are greater proficients than he (ver. 22).

Thus, after rising in the first fifteen verses of this Third Chapter, to an almost Christian height of patience, and resignation, and holy trust in the providence of God, Coheleth is smitten by the injustice and oppressions of man into the depths of a pessimistic materialism.

But now a new question arises. The Preacher's survey of human life has shaken his faith even in the conclusion which he has announced from the first, viz., that there is nothing better for a man than a quiet content, a busy cheerfulness, a tranquil enjoyment of the fruit of his toils. *This* at least he has supposed to be possible: but is it? All the activities, industries,

tranquillities of life are jeopardised, now by the inflexible ordinances of Heaven, and again by the capricious tyranny of man. To this tyranny his fellow-countrymen are now exposed. They groan under its heaviest oppressions. As he turns and once more reflects (chap. iv., ver. 1) on their unalleviated and unfriended misery, he doubts whether content, or even resignation, can be expected of them. With a tender sympathy that lingers on the details of their unhappy lot, and deepens into a passionate and despairing melancholy, he witnesses their sufferings and "counts the tears" of the oppressed. With the emphasis of a Hebrew and an Oriental, he marks and emphasises the fact that "they had no comforter," that though "their oppressors were violent, yet they had no comforter." For throughout the East, and among the Jews to this day, the manifestation of sympathy with those who suffer is far more common and ceremonious than it is with us. Neighbours and acquaintances are expected to pay long visits of condolence; friends and kinsfolk will travel long distances to pay them. Their respective places and duties in the house of mourning, their dress, words, bearing, precedence, are regulated by an ancient and elaborate etiquette. And, strange as it may seem to us, these visits are regarded not only as gratifying tokens of respect to the dead, but as a singular relief and comfort to the living. To the Preacher and his

fellow-captives, therefore, it would be a bitter aggravation of their grief that, while suffering under the most cruel oppressions of misfortune, they were compelled to forego the solace of these customary tokens of respect and sympathy. As he pondered their sad and unfriended condition, Coheleth—like Job, when his comforters failed him—is moved to curse his day. The dead, he affirms, are happier than the living,<sup>1</sup>—even the dead who died so long ago that the fate most dreaded in the East had befallen them, and the very

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<sup>1</sup> Xerxes, in his invasion of Greece, conceived the wish “to look upon all his host.” A throne was erected for him on a hill near Abydos, sitting on which he looked down and saw the Hellespont covered with his ships, and the vast plain swarming with his troops. As he looked, he wept; and when his uncle Artabanus asked him the cause of his tears, he replied: “There came upon me a sudden pity when I thought of the shortness of man’s life, and considered that of all this host, so numerous as it is, not one will be alive when a hundred years are gone by.” This is one of the most striking and best known incidents in the life of the Persian despot; but the rejoinder of Artabanus, though in a far higher strain, is less generally known. I quote it here, as an illustration of the Preacher’s mood. Said Artabanus: “And yet there are sadder things in life than that. Short as our time is, there is no man, whether it be here among this multitude or elsewhere, who is so happy as not to have felt the wish—I will not say once, but full many a time—that he were dead rather than alive. Calamities fall on us, sicknesses vex and harass us, and make life, short though it be, to appear long. *So death, through the wretchedness of our life, is a most sweet refuge to our race.*”—Herodotus, Book VII., c. 46.

*memory* of them had perished from the earth : while happier than either the dead, who have had to suffer in their time, or than the living, whose doom had still to be borne, were those who had never seen the light, never been born into a world all disordered and out of course (vv. 2, 3).<sup>1</sup>

This stinging sense of the miserable estate of his race has, however, diverted the Preacher from the conduct of the main argument he had in hand: to that he now returns (ver. 4). And now he argues: You cannot hope to get good fruit from a bad root. But the several industries in which you are tempted to seek "the chief good and market of your time" have a most base and evil origin; they "spring from man's jealous rivalry with his neighbour." Every man tries to outdo and to outsell his neighbours; to secure a larger business, to surround himself with a more profuse luxury, or to amass an ampler hoard of gold. This business life of yours is utterly selfish, and therefore utterly base. You are not content with a

*It is rendered  
hopeless by the  
base origin of  
Human In-  
dustries.*

Ch. iv., vv. 4-8.

<sup>1</sup> So in Sophocles (*Oed. Col.*, 1225) we read—I quote from Dean Plumptre's translation :

"Never to be at all  
Excels all fame;  
Quickly, next best, to pass  
From whence we came."

sufficient provision for simple wants. You do not seek your neighbour's good. You have no noble or patriotic aim. Your ruling intention is to enrich yourselves at the expense of neighbours who, in their turn, are *your* rivals rather than your neighbours, and who try to get the better of you just as you try to get the better of them. Can you hope to find the true Good in a life whose aims are so sordid, whose motives so selfish? The very sluggard who folds his hands in indolence so long as he has bread to eat is a wiser man than you; for he has at least his "handful of quiet," and knows some little enjoyment of life; while you, driven on by jealous competition and the eager cravings of insatiable desire, have neither leisure nor appetite for enjoyment: both your hands are full, indeed, but there is no quiet in them, only labour, labour, labour, with vexation of spirit (vv. 5, 6).

So intense and selfish was this rivalry, increase of appetite growing by what it fed upon, so keen grew the desire to amass, that the Preacher paints a portrait, for which no doubt many a Hebrew might have sat, of a man—nay, rather, of a miser—who, though solitary and kinless, with not even a son or a brother to inherit his wealth, nevertheless hoards up riches to the close of his life; there is no end to his labours; he never can be rich enough to allow himself any enjoyment of his gains (vv. 7, 8).

Now a jealous rivalry culminating in mere avarice,—that surely is not the wisest or noblest spirit of which those are capable who devote themselves to affairs. Even “the idols of the market” may have a purer cult. *Yet these are capable of a nobler Motive and Mode.* Business, like Wisdom or Mirth, may neither be, nor contain, the supreme Good: still, like them, it is not in itself and of necessity an evil. There must be a better mode of devotion to it than this selfish and greedy one; and such a mode Coheleth, before he pursues his argument to a close, pauses to point out. As if anticipating a modern theory which grows in favour with the wiser sort of mercantile men, he suggests that co-operation—of course I use the word in its etymological rather than in its technical sense—should be substituted for competition. “Two are better than one,” he argues; “union is better than isolation; conjoint labour brings the larger reward” (ver. 9). To bring his suggestion home to the business bosom of men, he uses five illustrations, four of which have a strong Oriental colouring.

The first is that of two pedestrians (ver. 10); if one should fall—and such an accident, owing to the bad roads and long cumbrous robes common in the East, was by no means infrequent—the other is ready to set him on his feet; while, if he is alone, the least that can befall him is that his robe will be trampled

and bemired before he can gather himself up again. In the second illustration (ver. 11), our two travellers, wearied by their journey, sleep together at its close. Now in Syria the nights are often keen and frosty, and the heat of the day makes men more susceptible to the cold. The sleeping-chambers, moreover, have only unglazed lattices which let in the frosty air as well as the welcome light; the bed is commonly a simple mat, the bedclothes only the garments worn through the day. And therefore the natives huddle together for the sake of warmth. To lie alone was to lie shivering in the chill night air. The third illustration (ver. 12) is also taken from the East. Our two travellers, lying snug and warm on their common mat, buried in slumber, that "dear repose for limbs with travel tired," were very likely to be disturbed by thieves who had dug a hole through the clay walls of the house, or crept under the tent, to carry off what they could. These thieves, always on the alert for travellers, are marvellously supple, rapid, and silent in their movements; but as the traveller, aware of his danger, commonly puts his "bag of needments" or valuables under his head, it does sometimes happen that the destest thief will rouse him by withdrawing it. If one of our two wayfarers was thus aroused, he would call on his comrade for help, and between them the thief would stand a poor chance; but the solitary traveller,

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suddenly roused from sleep, with no helper at hand, might very easily stand a worse chance than the thief. The fourth illustration (ver. 12) is that of the threefold cord—three strands twisted into one, which, as we all know, English no less than Hebrew, is much more than three times as strong as any one of the separate strands.

But in the fifth and most elaborate illustration (vv. 13, 14), we are once more carried back to the East. The slightest acquaintance with Oriental history will teach us how uncertain is the tenure of royal power; how often it has happened that a prisoner has been led from a dungeon to a throne, and a prince suddenly deposed and reduced to impotence and penury. Coheleth supposes such a case. On the one hand, we have a king old, but not venerable, since, long as he has lived, he has not "even yet learned to accept admonition;" he has led a solitary, selfish, suspicious life, secluded himself in his harem, surrounded himself with a troop of flattering courtiers and slaves. On the other hand, we have the poor but wise young man, "the affable youth," who has lived with all sorts and conditions of men, acquainted himself with their habits and wants and desires, and conciliated their regard. His growing popularity alarms the old despot and his minions. He is cast into prison. His wrongs and sufferings endear him to the wronged and suffering people.

By a sudden outbreak of popular wrath, by a revolution such as often sweeps through Eastern states, he is set free, and led from the prison to the throne, although he was once so poor that none would do him reverence. This is the picture in the mind's eye of the Preacher; and, as he contemplates it, he rises into a kind of prophetic rapture, and cries, "I see—I see all the living who walk under the sun flocking to the youth who stands up in the old king's stead; there is no end to the multitude of the people over whom he ruleth!" (ver. 15).

By these graphic illustrations Coheleth sets forth the superiority of the sociable over the solitary and selfish temper, of union over isolation, of the neighbourly goodwill which leads men to combine for common ends over the jealous rivalry which prompts them to take advantage of each other, and to labour each for himself alone.

But even as he urges this better, happier temper on men occupied with business and public affairs, even as he contemplates its brightest illustration in the youthful prisoner whose winning and sociable qualities have lifted him to a throne, the old mood of melancholy comes back on him; there is the familiar pathetic break in his voice as he concludes (ver. 16), that even this wise youth, who wins all hearts for a time, will soon be forgotten; that "even this," for all

so hopeful as it looks, "is vanity and vexation of spirit."

A profound gloom rests on the second act of this Drama. It has already taught us that we are helpless in the grip of laws which we had no voice in making ; that we often lie at the mercy of men whose mercy is but a caprice ; that in our origin and end, in body and spirit, in faculty and prospect, in our lives and pleasures, we are no better than the beasts which perish : that the avocations into which we plunge, and amid which we seek to forget our sad estate, spring from our jealousy the one of the other, and tend to a lonely miserliness without use or charm. The Preacher's familiar conclusion—"Be tranquil, be content, enjoy as much as you can"—has grown doubtful to him. He has seen the brightest promise come to nought. In a new and profounder sense, "all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

But, though passing through a great darkness, he sees, and reflects, some little light. Even when facts seem to contradict it, he holds fast to the conclusion that wisdom is better than folly, and kindness better than selfishness, and to do good even though you lose by it better than to do evil and gain by it. His faith wavers only for a moment ; it never wholly loosens its hold. And, in the fifth chapter, the light grows,

though even here the darkness does not altogether disappear. We are sensible that the twilight in which we stand is not that of evening, which will deepen into night, but that of morning, which will shine more and more until the day dawn, and the daystar arise in the calm heaven of patient tranquil hearts.

The men of affairs are led from the vocations of the Market and the intrigues of the Divan into the House of God. Our first glance at the worshippers is not hopeful or inspiriting. For here are men who offer sacrifices in lieu of obedience ; and here are men whose prayers are a voluble repetition of phrases which run far in advance of their limping thoughts and desires : and there are men quick to make vows in moments of peril, but slow to redeem them when the peril is past. At first the House of God looks very like a House of Merchandise, in which brokers and traders drive a traffic as dishonest as any that disgraces the Exchange. But while the merchants and politicians stand criticising the conduct of the worshippers, the Preacher turns upon them and shows them that *they* are the worshippers whom they criticise ; that he has held up a glass in which they see themselves as others see them ; that it is *they* who vow and

*So also a  
happier and  
more effective  
Method of .  
Worship is  
open to Men ;  
Ch. v., vv. 1-7.*

do not pay, *they* who hurry on their mouths to utter words which their hearts do not prompt, *they* who take the roundabout course of sinning and sacrificing for sin instead of that plain road of obedience which leads straight to God.

But what comfort for them is there in that? How should it help them, to be beguiled into condemning themselves? Truly there would not be much comfort in it did not the compassionate Preacher forthwith disclose the secret of this dishonest worship, and give them counsels of amendment. He discloses the secret in two verses (vv. 3 and 7), which have much perplexed the readers of this Book. He there explains that just as a mind harassed by much occupation and the many cares it breeds cannot rest even at nights, but busies itself in framing wild disturbing dreams, so also is it with the foolish worshipper who, for want of thought and reverence, pours out before God a multitude of unsifted and unconsidered wishes in a multitude of words. In effect he says to them: "You men of affairs often get little help or comfort from the worship of God because you come to it with preoccupied hearts, just as a man gets little comfort from his bed because his brain, jaded and yet excited by many cares, will not suffer him to rest. Hence it is that you promise more than you perform, and utter prayers more devout than any honest expression of your desires would

warrant, and offer sacrifices to avoid the charge and trouble of obedience to the Divine laws. And as I have shown you a more excellent way of transacting business than the selfish grasping mode to which you are addicted, so also I will show you a more excellent style of worship. Go to the House of God 'with a straight foot,' a foot trained to walk in the path of obedience. Keep your heart, set a watch over it, lest it should be diverted from the simple and devout homage it should pay. Do not urge and press it to a false emotion, to a strained and insincere mood. Let your words be few and reverent when you speak to the Great King. Do not vow except under the compulsion of stedfast resolves, and pay your vows even to your own hurt when once they are made. Do not anger God, or the angel of God who, as you believe, presides over the altar, with idle unreal talk and idle half-meant resolves, making vows of which you afterwards repent and do not keep, pleading that you made them in error or infirmity. But in all the exercises of your worship show a holy fear of the Almighty; and then, under the worst oppressions of fortune and the heaviest calamities of time, you shall find the House of God a *Sanctuary*, and his worship a strength, a consolation, and a delight." This, surely, was very wholesome counsel for men of business in hard times.

Not content with this, however, the Preacher goes on to show how, when they returned from the House of God to the common round of life, and were once more exposed to its miseries and distractions, there were certain comfortable and sustaining thoughts on which they might stay their spirits. To the worship of the Sanctuary he would have them add a strengthening trust in the Providence of God. That Providence was expressed, as in other ordinances, so also in these two :—

*And a more  
helpful and  
consolatory  
Trust in the  
Divine Provi-  
dence.*

Ch.v., vv. 8-17.

First ; whatever oppressions and perversions of justice and equity there were in the land (ver. 8), still the judges and satraps who oppressed them were not supreme ; there was an official hierarchy in which superior watched over superior, and if justice were not to be had of the one, it might be had of another who was above him ; if it were not to be had of any, no, not even of the king himself, there was this reassuring conviction that, in the last resort, even the king was “the servant of the field” (ver. 9), *i.e.*, was dependent on the wealth and produce of the land, and could not, therefore, be unjust with impunity, or push his oppressions too far lest he should decrease his revenue or depopulate his realm. This was “the advantage” the people had ; and if it were in itself but a slight advantage to this man or that, clearly it was

a great advantage to the body politic ; while as an indication of the Providence of God, of the care with which He had arranged for the general well-being, it was full of consolation.

The second fact, or class of facts, in which they might recognise the gracious care of God was this,—That the unjust judges and wealthy rapacious “lords” who oppressed them had very much less satisfaction in their fraudulent gains than they might suppose. God had so made men that injustice and selfishness defeated their own ends, and those who lived for wealth, and would do evil to acquire it, made but a poor bargain after all. “He that *loveth* silver is never satisfied with silver, nor he that *clings* to wealth with what it yields” (ver. 10). “When riches increase, they increase that consume them”—dependents, parasites, slaves, flock around the man who rises to wealth and place. He cannot eat and drink more, or enjoy more, than when he was a man simply well-to-do in the world ; the only advantage he has is that he sees others consume what he has acquired at so great a cost (ver. 11).<sup>1</sup> He cannot know the sweet

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<sup>1</sup> Ginsburg quotes a capital illustration of this verse from the dialogue of Pheraulas and Sacian (*Xenophon, Cyrop.*, viii. 3) ; “Do you think, Sacian, that I live with more pleasure the more I possess ? . . . By having this abundance I gain merely this, that I have to guard more, to distribute more to others, and have the trouble of taking care of more ; for a great many attendants

refreshing sleep of husbandmen weary with toil (ver. 12), for his heart is full of care and apprehension. Robbers may drive off his flocks, or "lift" his cattle; his investments may fail, or his secret hoard be plundered; he must trust much to servants, and they may be unfaithful to their trust; his official superiors may ruin him with the bribes they extort, or the prince himself may want a sponge to squeeze. If none of these evils befall him, he may apprehend, and have cause to apprehend, that his heir longs for his death, and will prove little better than a fool, wasting in wanton riot what *he* has amassed with much painful toil (vv. 13, 14). And, in any event, he cannot take his wealth with him on his last journey (vv. 15, 16). So that, naturally enough, he is much perturbed, and "hath great vexation and grief" (ver. 17), cannot sleep for his apprehensive care for his "abundance;" and at last must go out of the world as bare and unprovided as he came into it.<sup>1</sup> He "labours

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now demand of me their food, their drink, and their clothes. Whosoever, therefore, is greatly pleased with the possession of riches will, be assured, feel much annoyed at the expenditure of them."

<sup>1</sup> Compare Psalm xlix., vv. 16, 17 :

Be not afraid though one be made rich,

Or if the glory of his house be increased;

*For he shall carry away nothing with him when he dieth*

*Neither shall his pomp follow him.*

for the wind," and reaps what he has sown. Was such a life, mounting to such a close, a thing to long for and toil for? Was it worth while to hurl oneself against the adamantine laws of Heaven and risk the oppressions of earth, to injure one's neighbours, to sink into an insincere and distracted worship and a weakening distrust of the providence of God, in order to spend anxious toilsome days and sleepless nights, and at last to go out of the world naked of all but guilt, and rich in nothing but the memory of frauds and wrongs? Might not even a captive or a slave, whose sleep was sweetened by toil, and who, from his trust in God and the sacred delights of honest worship, gathered strength to endure all the oppressions of the time, and to enjoy whatever alleviations and innocent pleasures were vouchsafed him—might not even he be a wiser, happier man than the despot at whose caprice he stood?

For himself Coheleth has a very decided opinion on this point. He is quite sure that *The Conclusion.* his first conclusion is sound, though for Ch. v., vv. 18-20. a moment he had questioned its soundness, and that a quiet, cheerful, and obedient heart is greater riches than the wealthiest estate. With all the emphasis of renewed and now immovable conviction he declares, Behold, that which I have said holds good; it is

well for a man to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labours through the brief day of his life. And I have also said—and this too is true—that a man to whom God hath given riches and wealth—for even a rich man may be a good man and use his wealth wisely—if He hath also enabled him to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour—this too is a most Divine gift. He does not fret over the brevity of his life; it is not much, or often, or sadly in his thoughts: for he knows that the joy his heart takes in the toils and pleasures of life is approved by God, or even, as the phrase seems to mean, corresponds in some measure with the joy of God Himself; that his tranquil enjoyment is a reflection of the Divine peace.

II.<sup>1</sup> There are not many Englishmen who devote themselves solely or mainly to the acquisition of Wisdom, and who, that they may teach the children of men that which is good, live laborious days, with-

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<sup>1</sup> In commenting on Sections II. and III. of this Book I found that both the exposition of the sacred text and the application of its lessons to the details of modern life would gain in force by being handled separately. The second part of each of these chapters consists mainly, therefore, of an exhortation based on the previous exposition, the marginal notes indicating the passages of Holy Writ on which these exhortations are based.

drawing from the general pursuit of wealth and scorning the lures of ease and self-indulgence; such men, indeed, are but a small minority in any age or land. Nor do those who give themselves exclusively to the pursuit of Pleasure constitute more than a small and miserable class, though most of us have wasted on it days that we could ill spare. But when the Hebrew Preacher, having followed his quest of the supreme Good in Pleasure and Wisdom, turns to the affairs of Business—and I use that term as including both commerce and politics—he enters a field of action and inquiry with which we are nearly all familiar, and can hardly fail to speak words which will touch us close home. For, whatever else we may or may not be, we are most of us among the worshippers of the great god Traffic—a god whose wholesome, benignant face too often lowers and darkens, or ever we are aware, into the sordid and malignant features of Mammon.

Now in dealing with this broad and momentous province of human life the Preacher exhibits the candour and the temperance which marked his treatment of Wisdom and Mirth. Just as he would not suffer us to think of Wisdom as in itself an evil, nor of Pleasure as an evil, so neither will he allow us to think of Business as essentially and of necessity an evil. This, like those, may be abused to our hurt; but none the less they may all be used, and were meant to be used,

for our own and our neighbours' good. Pursued in the right method, from the right motive, with the due moderation and reserve, Business, as he is careful to point out, besides bringing other great advantages, may be a new bond of union and brotherhood : it develops intercourse among men and races of men, and should develop sympathy, goodwill, and a mutual helpfulness. Nevertheless, thirst may degenerate into miserliness, and the honest industry of content into a dishonest eagerness for undue gains, and a wise attention to business into an excessive devotion to it. These degenerate tendencies had struck their roots deep into the Hebrew mind of his day, and brought forth many bitter fruits. The Preacher describes and denounces them ; he lays an axe to the very roots of these evil growths : but it is only that he may clear a space for the fairer and more wholesome growths which sprang beside them, and of which they were the wild bastard offshoots.

Throughout this second section of the Book, his subject is excessive devotion to Business, and the correctives to it which his experience enables him to suggest.

i. His handling of the subject is very thorough and complete. Men of business might do worse than get the lessons he here teaches by heart. According to him, their excessive devotion to affairs springs from a "jealous rivalry" ; it tends to form in them a grasping

covetous temper which can never be satisfied, to produce a materialistic scepticism of all that is noble, spiritual, aspiring in thought and action, to render their worship formal and insincere, and, in general, to incapacitate them for any quiet happy enjoyment of their life. This is his diagnosis of their disease, or of that diseased tendency which, if it be for the most part latent in them, always threatens to become pronounced and to infect all healthy conditions of the soul.

(a) Let us glance once more at the several symptoms we have already heard him discuss, and consider whether or not they accord with the results of our own observation and experience. Is it true, then—or, rather, is it not true—that our devotion to business is becoming excessive and exhausting, and that this devotion springs mainly from our jealous rivalry and competition with each other? If, some two or three and twenty centuries ago, the Jews were bent every man on outdoing and outselling his neighbour; if his main ambition was to amass greater wealth or to secure a larger business than his competitors, or to make a handsomer show before the world; if in the urgent

*Devotion to  
Business  
springs from  
Jealous Compe-  
tition :  
Ch. iv., v. 4.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Coheleth's description is so true and pertinent, it hits so many of our modern faults and sins, that I am obliged to cite my authority for every paragraph lest I should be suspected of putting a private and personal interpretation on these ancient words.

pursuit of this ambition he held his neighbours not as neighbours, but as unscrupulous rivals, keen for gain at his expense and to rise by his fall ; if, to reach his end, he was willing to get up early and go late to rest, to force all his energies into an injurious activity and strain them close to the snapping-point : if this were what a Jew of that time was like, might you not easily take it for a portrait of many an English merchant, manufacturer, lawyer, or politician ? Is it not as accurate a delineation of our life as it could be of any ancient form of life ? If it be, as I think it is, we have grave need to take the Preacher's warning. We gravely need to remember that the stream cannot rise above its source, nor the fruit be better than the root from which it grows ; that the business ardour which has its origin in a base and selfish motive can only be a base and selfish ardour. When men gather grapes from thorns and figs from thistles, then, but not before, we may look to find a satisfying good in "all the toil and all the dexterity in toil" which spring from this "jealous rivalry of the one with the other."

(b) Nor, in the face of facts patent to the most cursory observer, can we deny that this eager and excessive devotion to the successful conduct of business tends to produce a grasping, covetous temper which, however much it has gained, is for ever seeking more. It is not only

*It tends to form  
a Covetous  
Temper;*

Ch. iv., v. 8.

true that the stream cannot rise above its source ; it is also true that the stream *will* run downward, and must inevitably contract many pollutions from the lower levels on which it declines. The ardour which impels men to devote themselves with eager intensity to the labours of the Market may often have an origin as pure as that of the stream which bubbles up on the hills, amid grass and ferns, and runs tinkling along its clear rocky channels, setting its labour to a happy music, singing its low sweet song to the sweet listening air. But as it runs on, if it swell in volume and power, it also *sinks* and grows foul. Bent at first on acquiring the means to support a widowed mother, or to justify him in taking a wife, or to provide for his children, or to win an honourable place in his neighbours' eyes, or to achieve the chance of self-culture and self-development, or to serve some public and worthy end, the man of business and affairs too often suffers himself to become more and more absorbed in his pursuits. He conceives larger schemes, is drawn into more perilous enterprises, and advances through these to fresh openings and opportunities, until at last, long after his original ends are compassed and forgotten, he finds himself possessed by the mere craving to extend his labours, resources, influence, if not by the mere craving to amass—a craving which often “teareth” and “tormenteth” him, but which can only be exorcised by an exertion of spiritual

force which would leave him half dead. "He has no one with him, not even a son or a brother;" the dear mother or wife is long since dead; his children, to use his own detestable phrase, are "off his hands"; the public good has slipped from his memory and aims: but still "there is no end to all his labours, neither are his eyes satisfied with riches." Coheleth speaks of one such man: alas, of how many such might we speak!

(c) The "speculation" in the eye of business men is not commonly of a philosophic cast, and therefore we do not look to find them *arguing* themselves into the materialism which infected the Hebrew Preacher as he contemplated them and their blind devotion to their Idol. They are far, perhaps very far, from thinking that in body and spirit, in origin and end, man is no better than the beast, a creature of the same accident and subject to "the same chance." But though they do not reason out a conclusion so sombre and depressing, do they not practically acquiesce in it? If it is far from their thoughts, do they not *live* in its close neighbourhood? Their mind, like the dyer's hand, is subdued to that it works in. Accustomed to think mainly of material interests, their character is materialised. They are disposed to weigh all things—truth, righteousness, the motives and aims of nobler

*To produce a  
Materialistic  
Scepticism ;  
Ch. iii.,  
vv. 18-21.*

men—in the scales of the market, and can very hardly believe that they should attach any grave value to ought which will not lend itself to their coarse handling. In their judgment, mental culture, or the graces of moral character, or single-hearted devotion to lofty ends, are not worthy to be compared with a full purse or large possessions. They regard as little better than a fool, of whom it is very kind of them to take a little care, the man who has thrown away what they call “his chances,” in order that he may learn wisdom or do good. Giving, perhaps, a cheerful and unforced accord to the current moral maxims and popular creed, they permit neither to rule their conduct. If they do not say, “Man is no better than a beast,” they carry themselves as if he were no better, as though he had no instincts or interests above those of the thrifty ant, or the cunning beaver, or the military locust, or the insatiable leech—although they are both surprised and affronted when one is at the pains to translate their deeds into words. Judged by their deeds, they *are* sceptics and materialists, since they have no vital faith in that which is spiritual and unseen. They have found “the life of their hands,” and they are content with it. Give them whatever furnishes the senses, whatever in them holds by sense, and they will cheerfully let all else go. But such a materialism as this is far more injurious, far more likely to be fatal,

than that which reflects, and argues, and utters itself in words, and refutes itself by the very powers which it employs. With them the malady has struck inward, and is beyond the reach of cure save by the most searching and drastic remedies.

(d) But now if, like Coheleth, we follow these men to the Temple, what is the scene that meets our eye ? In the English Temple, I fear, that which would first strike an unaccustomed observer would be the fact that very few men of business are there. They are "conspicuous by their absence," or, at best, noted for an only occasional attendance. The Hebrew Temple was crowded with men ; in the English Temple it is the other sex which predominates. But glance at the men who are there ? Do you detect no signs of weariness and perfunctoriness ? Do you hear no vows which will never be paid, and which they do not intend to pay even when they make them ? no prayers which go beyond any honest and candid expression of their desires ? Do you not feel and know that many of them are making an unwilling sacrifice to the decencies and the proprieties, instead of worshipping God the Spirit in spirit and nerving themselves for the difficulties of obedience to the Divine law ? Listen : they are saying, " Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we bless Thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of

*To make Worship Formal and Insincere;*

Ch. v., vv. 1-7.

this life ; but *above all* for Thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory." But *are* these ineffable spiritual benefits "above all" else to them ? Do they care for "the means of grace" as much even as for the state of the market, or for "the hope of glory" as much as for success or promotion ? Which is most in their thoughts, their lives, their aspirations, for which will they take most pains and make most sacrifices—for what *they* mean by the beautiful phrase "all the blessings of this life," or for that sacred and crowning act of the Divine Mercy, "the redemption," in which God has once for all revealed his fatherly forgiving love ?

What is it that makes their worship formal and insincere ? It is the very cause which, as the Preacher tells us, produced the like evil effect upon the Jews. They come into the Temple with pre-occupied hearts. Their thoughts are distracted by the cares of life even as they bend in worship. And hence even the most sacred words turn to "idle talk" on their lips, as remote from the true feeling of the moment as "the multitude of dreams" which haunt the night ; they utter fervent prayers without any due sense of their meaning, or any hearty wish to have them granted.

(e) Now surely a life so thick with perils, so beset

with temptations, should have a very large and certain reward to offer. But has it ? For one, Coheleth thinks it has not. In his judgment, according to his experience, instead of making a man happier even in this present time, to which it limits his thoughts and aims, it robs him of all quiet and happy enjoyment of his life. And, mark, it is not the unsuccessful man of business, who might naturally feel sore and aggrieved, but the successful man, the man who has made a fortune and prospered in his schemes, whom the Preacher describes as having lost all faculty of enjoying his gains. Even the man who has wealth and abundance, so that his soul lacketh nothing of all that he desireth, is placed before us as the slave of unsatisfied desire and constant apprehension. Both his hands are so full of labour that he cannot lay hold on quiet. Though he loves silver so well, and has so much of it, he is not satisfied therewith ; his riches yield him no certain and abiding delight. And how can he be in "happy plight " who is

*And to take  
from Life its  
Quiet and In-  
nocent Enjoy-  
ments.*

Ch.v.,vv.10-17.

"debarred the benefit of rest ?  
When day's oppression is not eased by night,  
But day by night, and night by day, oppress'd ?  
And each, though enemies to either's reign,  
Do in consent shake hands to torture him."

The sound sleep of humble contented labour is denied

him. He is haunted by perpetual apprehensions that "there is some ill a-brewing to his rest," that evil in some dreaded shape will befall him. He doubts "the filching age will steal his treasure." He knows that when he is called hence he can carry away nothing in his hand; all his gains must be left to his heir, who may either turn out a wanton fool or be crushed and degraded by the burden and temptations of a wealth for which he has not laboured. And hence, amid all his toils and gains, even the most prosperous and successful man suspects that he has been "labouring for the wind" and may reap the whirlwind: "he is much perturbed, and hath vexation and grief."

*Is the picture overdrawn? Is not the description as true to modern experience as to that of "the antique world"? Shakespeare, who is our great English authority on the facts of human experience, thought it quite as true. His Merchant of Venice has argosies on every sea; and two of his friends, hearing him confess that sadness makes such a want-wit of him that he has much ado to know himself, tell him that his "mind is tossing on the ocean" with his ships. They proceed to discuss the natural effects of having so many enterprises on hand. One says—*

" Believe me, Sir, had I such venture forth,  
The better part of my affections would

Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still  
Plucking the grass, to know where sits the wind ;  
Peering in maps for ports, and piers, and roads ;  
And every object that might make me fear  
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt  
Would make me sad."

And the other adds—

" My wind, cooling my broth,  
Would blow me to an ague, when I thought  
What harm a wind too great at sea might do.  
I should not see the sandy hour-glass run,  
But I should think of shallows and of flats,  
And see my wealthy Andrew, dock'd in sand,  
Vailing her high-top lower than her ribs  
To kiss her burial. Should I go to church  
And see the holy edifice of stone,  
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,  
Which, touching but my gentle vessel's side,  
Would scatter all her spices in the stream ;  
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks :  
And, in a word, but even now worth this,  
And now worth nothing ? Shall I have the thought  
To think on this ; and shall I lack the thought  
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad ? "

"Abundance suffereth not the rich to sleep ;" the thought that his "riches may perish in some unlucky adventure" rings a perpetual alarm in his ears: "all his days he eateth in darkness, and is much perturbed, and hath vexation and grief." These are the words of the Hebrew Preacher : are not our own great poet's

words an expressive commentary on them, an absolute confirmation of them, covering them point by point? And shall we envy the wealthy merchant whose two hands are thus "full of labour and vexation of spirit"? Is not "the husbandman whose sleep is sweet, whether he eat little or much," better off than he? Nay, has not even the sluggard who, so long as he hath meat, foldeth his hands in quiet, a truer enjoyment of his life?

Of course Coheleth does not mean to imply that every man of business degenerates into a miserly sceptic, whose worship is a formulated hypocrisy and whose life is haunted with saddening apprehensions of misfortune. No doubt there were then, as there are now, many men of business who were wise enough to "take pleasure in all their labours," to cast their burden of care on Him in whose care stand both to-morrow and to-day; men to whom worship was a calming and strengthening communion with the Father of their spirits, and who advanced, through toil, to worthy or even noble ends. He means simply that these are the perils to which all men of business are exposed, and into which they fall so soon as their devotion to its affairs grows excessive. "Make business, and success in business, your chief good, your ruling aim, and you will come to think of your neighbours as selfish rivals; you will begin to look askance on the losty spiritual

qualities which refuse to bow to the yoke of Mammon ; your worship will sink into an insincere formalism ; your life will be vexed and saddened with fears which will strangle the very faculty of tranquil enjoyment : " this is the warning of the Preacher ; a warning of which our generation, in such urgent sinful haste to be rich, stands in very special need.

2. But what checks, what correctives, what remedies, would the Preacher have us apply to the diseased tendencies of the time ? How shall men of business save themselves from being absorbed in its interests and affairs ?

(a) Well, the very sense of the danger to which they are exposed—a danger so insidious, so profound, so fatal—should surely induce caution and a wary self-control. The symptoms of the disease are described that we may judge whether or not we are infected by it ; its dreadful issues that, if infected, we may study a cure. The man who loves riches is placed before us that we may learn what he is really like—that he is not the careless happy being we often assume him to be. We see him decline on the low bare levels of covetousness and materialism, hypocrisy and fear ; and, as we look, the Preacher turns upon us with, " There, *that* is the slave of Mammon in his habit as he lives. Do you care

*The Correctives of this Devotion are a Sense of its Perils ; Ch. v., vv.  
10-17.*

to be like that? Will you break your heart unless you are allowed to assume his heavy and degrading burden?"

This is one help to a wise content with our lot; but he has many more at our service, and notably this,—that an undue devotion to the toils of business is contrary to the will, the design, the providence of God. God, he argues, has fixed a time for every undertaking under heaven, and has made each of them beautiful in its season, but only then. By his wise kindly ordinances He has sought to divert us from an injurious excess in toil. Our sowing and our reaping, our time of rest and our time for work, the time to save and the time to spend, the time to gain and the time to lose,—all these, with all the fluctuating feelings they excite in us: in short, our whole life, from the cradle to the grave, is under, or should be under, law to Him. It is only when we violate his gracious ordinances,—working when we should be at rest, waking when we should sleep, saving when we should spend, weeping over losses which are real gains, or laughing over gains which will prove to be losses,—that we run into excess, and break up the peaceful order and tranquil flow of the life which He designed for us.

Because we will not be obsequious to the ordinances

*And the Conviction that it is opposed to the Will of God as expressed in the Ordinances of his Providence, Ch. iii., vv. 1-8.*

of his wisdom, He permits us to meet a new check in the caprice and injustice of man--making even these to praise Him by subserving our good. If we do not suffer the violent oppressions which drew tears from the Preacher's fellow-captives, we nevertheless stand very much at the mercy of our neighbours in so far as our outward haps are concerned. Unwise human laws or an unjust administration of them, or the selfish rapacity of individual men—brokers who rig the market; bankers whose long prayers are a pretence under cloak of which they rob widows and orphans, and sometimes *make* them; bankrupts for whose wounds the Gazette has a singular power of healing, since they come out of it “sounder” men than they went in: these are only some of the instruments by which the labours of the diligent are shorn of their due reward. And we are to take these checks as correctives, to find in the losses which men inflict the gifts of a gracious God. He permits us to suffer these and the like disasters lest our hearts should be overmuch set on getting gain. He graciously permits us to suffer them that, seeing how often the wicked thrive (in a way and for a time) on the decay of the upright, we may learn that there is something better than wealth, more enduring, more satisfying, and may seek that higher good.

*In the Wrongs  
which He per-  
mits Men to  
inflict upon us;*  
Ch. iii., v. 16-  
Ch. iv., v. 3.

Nay, going to the very root of the matter and expounding its whole philosophy, the Preacher teaches us that wealth, however great and greatly used, *cannot* satisfy men, since God has “*put eternity into their hearts*” as well as time : and how should all the kingdoms of a world that must soon pass content those who are to live for ever ?<sup>1</sup> This saying, “God has put *eternity* into their hearts,” is one of the most profound in the whole Book, and one of the most beautiful and suggestive. What it means is that, even if a man would confine his aims and desires within “the bounds and coasts of Time,” he cannot do it. The very structure of his nature forbids it. For time, with all that it inherits, sweeps by him like a torrent, so that, if he would secure any lasting good, he *must* lay hold of that which is eternal. We may well call this world, for all so solid as it looks, “a perishing world ;” for, like our own bodies, it is in a perpetual flux, perishing every moment that it may live a little longer, and must

*But above all,  
in the immor-  
tal Cravings  
which He has  
quickened in  
the Soul.*

Ch. iii., v. 11.

<sup>1</sup> M. de Lamennais—the founder of the most religious school of thinkers in modern France, from whom such men as Count Montalembert, Père Lacordaire, and Maurice Guérin, drew their earliest inspiration—asks, “Do you know what it is that makes man the most suffering of all creatures ?” and replies, “It is that *he has one foot in the finite and the other in the infinite, and that he is torn asunder*, not by four horses, as in the horrible old times, but *between two worlds*.”

soon come to an end. But we, in our true selves, we who dwell inside the body and use its members as the workman uses his tools, how can we find a satisfying good whether in the body or in the world which is akin to it? We want a good as lasting as ourselves. Nothing short of that can be our chief good, or inspire us with a true content.

"Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end ;  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend : "

and we might as well think to build a stable habitation on the waves which break upon the pebbled shore as to find an enduring good in the sequent minutes which carry us down the stream of time. It is only because we do not understand this "work of God" in putting eternity into our hearts and therefore making it impossible for us to be content with anything less than an eternal good; it is because, plunged in the flesh and its cares and delights, we forget the grandeur of our nature, and are tempted to sell our immortal birthright for a mess of pottage which, however much we enjoy it to-day, will leave us hungry to-morrow: it is only, I say, because we fail to understand this work of God "from beginning to end," that we ever delude ourselves with the hope of finding in ought the earth yields a good in which we can rest.